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CHANDLER

Illustrated FICTION

A VISUAL NOVEL BY STERANKO

AN
ILLUSTRATED
NOVEL

CHANDLER...

a tough,
new detective
in a new kind
of mystery thriller
that explodes
with the fury of
a lightning bolt!

THE CHANDLER FILE

With this third volume of **Fiction Illustrated**, the series presents a dramatic and sweeping new approach from the hands of one of America's most innovative and exciting graphic artists, Steranko.

After five years of work as a painter, publisher, writer, illustrator and designer, Steranko has returned to the medium of the graphic story.

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Fiction Illustrated is a showcase for new directions with the graphic story. In that context, it is now a rare privilege to reintroduce one of our finest graphic storytellers at the height of his career.

BYRON PREISS
Editor
May, 1976

RED

A CHANDLER NOVEL BY

STERANKO

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The character of Chandler
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INTRODUCTION

The longer you boil an egg, the harder it gets. In the Twenties and Thirties the pulp magazines boiled their eggs very hard indeed, but none as hard as Carroll John Daly's kill-crazy private eye named Race Williams. Then, in October, 1923, the hard-boiled story found its true focus when *Black Mask* published the first Continental Op story by ex-Pinkerton detective Dashiell Hammett.

Through the Op, and later through Sam Spade, Hammett made the hard-boiled detective story a genuine and original American art form (along with jazz and the strip tease).

The Hammett-style eye is a loner, outside the system, going against the grain. He lives by the gun and knows he'll die by it—and is just tough enough not to care. Although he peers under society's rocks and grubs through it's garbage pails, he offers no apologies. He is his own man.

The private eye expresses something so lasting in the American psyche that he has dominated our popular fictions for half a century. And now he is reborn yet again in that new, uniquely American art form, the graphic novel.

The graphic novel is much more than a "comic book." It is a singular blend of words and pictures that makes you, the reader, participate in the act of creation as nothing else has done since the early days of radio drama. You must "see" the action between panels in your imagination, which makes a novel like *Red Tide* an art of collaboration between you and the artist.

Steranko's *Red Tide* is set in the Forties and Chandler, its hero-detective, is in the classic mould. "I'm not a hired gun," he tells a client. "I don't like to be shot at." But his profession often makes him a target anyway, because he gets paid "for doing what other men couldn't do—or wouldn't do."

Steranko is one of America's finest living artists. *Red Tide* proves he is also an evocative novelist and a master story-teller. Read, savor, enjoy—you hold an instant classic in your hands.

JOE GORES
San Francisco
April, 1976

MONDAY
3:21 AM

The man must have been right on my heels because by the time I settled into the familiar swivel chair, he snapped the door open.

"Are. . .you Mr. Chandler?"

It was late and I was ready to call it a night.

"I'm his valet. He'll be in tomorrow," I said.

"It is tomorrow," he persisted. "I've got 72 hours to live, Mr. Chandler. I want you to find my murderer."

At first, I thought it was a gag set up by the jokers down at Hurley's, but a second look at the man changed my mind. He wore a dark weave fly-front topcoat with peak lapels and a Homburg hat, all strictly uptown stuff.

What cinched it was the look on his face. He was sweating like a cold pitcher of beer on an August afternoon. His eyes were pinpoints that gave his face a hollow, haunted appearance.

"My name is Bramson Todd and I need your help. I've been poisoned. I'm a dead man."

The back of my neck started to tingle. "You need a doctor, not a detective." I reached for the phone. He stopped me.

"No. I've just come from the hospital, Mr. Chandler; I know all there is to know. I've been poisoned and they've given me 72 hours to live. No more. The doctors can't help me now. I've been murdered, and I want to know who did it! Find my killer, Chandler—find him and make him pay for it!"

Perspiration beaded continuously on his taut face, cascaded along the shallow jawline and was absorbed in the neat Glen Urquhart plaid necktie. Inside the coat, Todd shivered compulsively as he spoke in a low droning monotone that had an edge on it as sharp as a barber's straight razor. His hands had a life of their own and fatigued an expensive pair of kidskin gloves. He did his best to keep in control of the situation. It wasn't enough.

"Sorry, Mr. Todd, I'm not an executioner, just a private cop. Try the police. I know a few dicks who'll listen."

"No," he said. "I remember reading about you in the papers several months ago...the shooting, near Bensonhurst, I think."

"Yeah. That one made the papers. Magadino and Heller, trigger men who worked for Lepke. They had it coming."

"But you shot them, both of them, I believe...by yourself!"

"Not by myself. I had this."

Todd squinted as I reached into my desk drawer.

"This is a Colt semi-automatic pistol, model 1911A1. It weighs exactly two point four three pounds unloaded and is over eight and a half inches long.

"It shoots seven .45 caliber bullets, each of which weighs over an ounce and can penetrate eleven inches of pine at fifty feet.

"It can take a man's head off or stop him cold if he's hit almost anywhere. Sometimes there's no other way.

"I spend most of my time following husbands who are following their neighbor's wives, playing tag with non-support deadbeats, or helping insurance outfits to buy their client's jewelry back from second story men.

"You're asking me to tackle a murder. I still think you want the police. I'm not a hired gun, and I don't like to be shot at. But I won't charge anything to listen to your story."

I didn't know if I could do anything for him, or if I should, but he seemed to relax a shade, leaned back against the chair and told me a tale that made Poe seem like Mother Goose.

Todd had spent his life trying to be a success as a painter but nobody seemed to notice. Though he appeared older than he really was, Todd had probably cut quite a figure in his youth.

His favorite model was his wife, the subject of most of his paintings. He spoke about her as if she was a goddess, and lowered his voice when he recalled her death several years ago.

Unable to make a living as a fine artist, Todd had taken a position managing a small but prosperous Madison Avenue art gallery. In the past year, his work had been "discovered," but the recognition had come too late. He didn't care about it now.

The fact that he wasn't able to share his success with the woman who inspired it had taken the heart from him, turned him into a withered, humorless shell.

He spent his time and money doing the things he was never able to do as a young man. Gambling had become a frequent diversion.

About two weeks ago, he had spent the evening aboard the *Lady Luck*, a 150-foot yacht converted into a classy gambling ship that worked legitimately outside New York harbor's three-mile limit.

Toward the end of the night, he had boarded a small launch, along with a dozen other gamesters, to come ashore. What happened next tangled him in a crime that became front page headlines in every newspaper the following day. He had witnessed the machine gun slaughter of five of the boat's passengers, and had barely escaped with his life.

The cops had termed the kill a "gangland" murder with the ship's owner, Jake Kubelik, as the target. The others got hit because they were in the way.

No witnesses had come forward with testimony during the police investigation, but who expected them to? More than likely, they were prominent New Yorkers out for a night on the town who wound up buying a nightmare. They'd clam up to avoid the scandal.

There were five, maybe six, witnesses who scattered and stayed alive. Nobody knew why the hit man hadn't finished the job. Maybe the "Chicago piano," as the papers liked to call it, had jammed. Maybe somebody started shooting back.

In any case, there were witnesses to the crime who could finger the killer, and Todd apparently was one of them.

That fact, he said, was costing him his life.

The news hawks sold papers with predictable indignance about "ineffective" police methods. Meanwhile, the DA's office claimed to be "close" to solving the Kubelik murder.

By "close," they meant they were putting the heat on Joe October, one of Big Town's prominent racketeers who had a life-long feud with Kubelik. Trouble was, he had an alibi that couldn't be broken with a jackhammer.

"I was scared and watched the papers. Then it started all over again."

Three days after the incident, Todd spotted a news photo of one of the other witnesses, who was apparently killed in an auto accident. The next day, another turned up as a suicide victim. Todd was shaken. He moved out of his apartment into a hotel. That was when the nausea and dizziness began. The killer found him, and used a slow-working poison. The hospital diagnosed it as lithium chloride. They gave him 72 hours.

"I didn't tell the doctors how it happened. Not that it made any difference. They told me there was no antidote."

Todd thought his apartment had been entered and the toxic compound dropped in his liquor supply. He didn't know, cared even less. He had to live with it—and in three days die with it.

"They tried to make me stay in the hospital, but I couldn't—I had to get outside. I walked for hours. I was sick, burning up from the inside, and with every step I became angrier. The pain that was churning inside me turned to hate. I've painted death, Mr. Chandler, but I never knew it was like this—or how much I wanted to live.

"Then I realized I wanted him to feel like I felt. I wanted to see his face. I wanted him to know he's a dead man. . .just like me!

"I remembered your name from the papers and tried the phone book. Please help me. Find him...find him and even the score, Mr. Chandler!

"Name your price!"

I turned, looked out at the city, stood in the glow of its neon heartbeat, while mine kept the same pace. The night stretched to infinity, eliminating the physical barriers of the day. Night became a world unto itself. A playground of the damned. It belonged to those who wanted it, something the day could never offer its own people. I knew the night crawlers: the hoods, the hookers, the creeps, the big shots, the cops, the con men, the grifters, the grafters, the three-time losers, the guys who know what six, two and even means—like predators, each somehow dependant upon the others. I was one of them. I was part of everything that happened—and who it happened to. In the end, I knew we would all be victims of the night.

Somewhere below, a killer walked the streets, planning to take another life. I knew I'd be there when it happened.

Todd was asking me to put my life on the line for 72 hours, to hunt down a maniac with a machine gun and no identity.

I was a target. I got paid for doing what other men couldn't do—or wouldn't do.

The goldleaf on my office door spelled out "Metropolitan Security, 24-Hour Investigation and Protection," and made me an accomplice to every John who walked through it with his palms out or his thumbs down.

I help those who need help, and sometimes get hurt doing it.

I had a feeling this was going to be one of those times.

Todd dropped an envelope on my desk that sprouted fifty dollar bills, twenty of them.

"Twenty-five a day plus expenses." I thumbed off two leaves, slid the rest toward him. He let it lay.

"Call it a retainer," he said

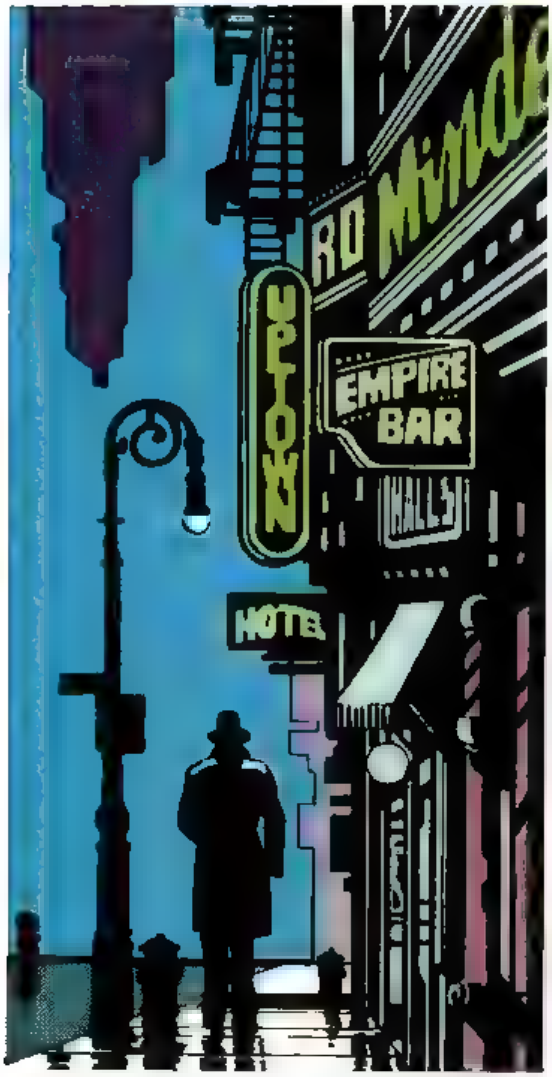
"Let's call it a retainer," I said.

Todd nodded nervously one last time as the hack angled away from the curb and headed uptown to the St. Moritz at Fifth Avenue and Central Park South.

We both knew what had to be done: The hit man was finishing the job with two witnesses already iced— three counting Todd. All I had to do was find the others—and wait.

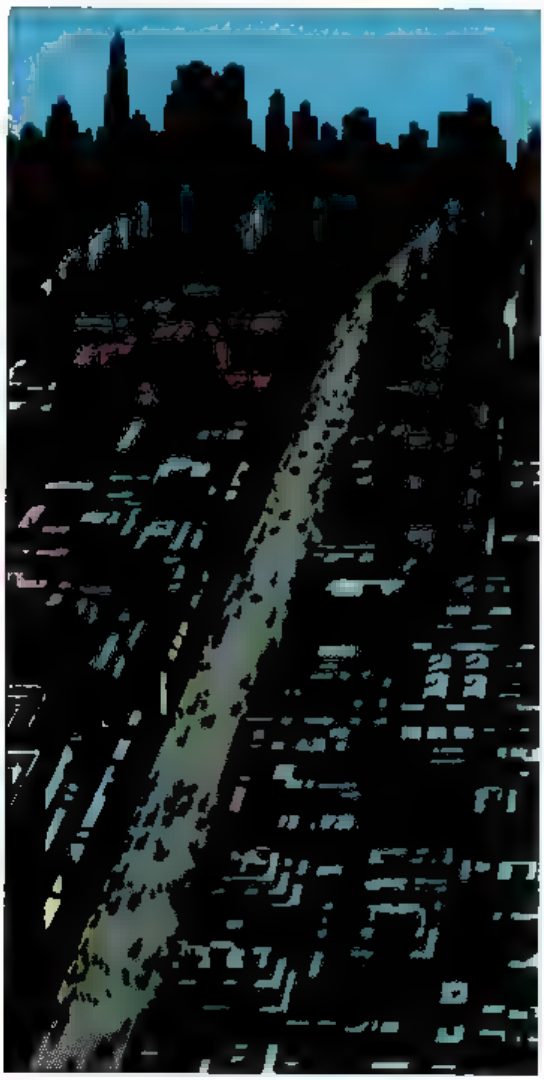
What I couldn't figure out was how in the hell he had located his victims after seeing them for only a minute or less. Todd wasn't much help along those lines either. He had recognized the photos in the paper, but could only tell me he thought a man and two women still survived.

Unless I got a lead right away, there'd be three more corpses on their way to the morgue. Maybe it was too late already. Todd had saved the kicker for last—he had not even seen the killer!



I'd been hired to do a job by a walking dead man, and if I had to, I'd tear the city apart. It looked like today was going to be a very busy day.

We had just shaved two hours off the time I had to find the hit man. The streets were almost empty now; the night people had vanished until the next sundown. Only the most hard-up still searched. The rest had scored with a bottle, a syringe, or a partner and were making their own dreams.



Within minutes, the very tops of Manhattan's towers would see the cold glow of the Autumn dawn. I don't care to watch the sunrise. It marks the end of my day and makes me feel like a kid who doesn't want to go to bed at night or get up in the morning—only in reverse.

I headed west toward the hotel I called home, and planned some strategy to catch a killer. It wasn't my idea of a good time.

MONDAY
10:12 AM

By ten I had showered and shaved, and was trying to figure out if three hours of sack time did me more harm than good.

A plan was beginning to mesh in my head, and I fortified it by climbing into my best—and only—dark blue double-breasted worsted. I called it a "getaway" suit because it wore well under duress, didn't wrinkle badly and kept a crease in the pants for a long time. I threw in the lucky tie for good measure.

I replayed the conversation I had with Todd until his words sounded like a Victrola with the needle stuck: "I've got 72 hours to live. I want you to find my murderer!"

The clock kept telling me I had 65 hours left to keep a promise I'd made to a dead man. I wondered where I'd be when the time ran out, and what I'd do if I caught the killer in the time that remained. It was the kind of wondering that could spoil an appetite.

"Must be important, Sherlock Your lucky tie and all."

"Didn't think you'd recognize me with my clothes on, beautiful." I winked and sat down to a couple of eggs over and coffee with two creams, and debated about a good-looking piece of apple pie that was trying to seduce me.

Meanwhile, I thought I'd give a call to Tom O'Hara down at Homicide. He didn't like me much, and I didn't lose any sleep over it. He gave me the kind of welcome that Dempsey gave Firpo.

"Okay, Chandler, let me guess. You're carrying the Black Plague—or is it something serious?"

"Okay with me if you want to audition. Just thought I'd throw you a bone."

"Yeah, with a ransom note tied to it. Let's have it."

"I was wondering if you had any action on the Kubelik case?"

"Can you afford a newspaper?"

"Can you afford to play your hole card to the press? That October angle, it works too damn well. This isn't prohibition anymore."

"Sometimes it's worse. We're trying to break Joe October's alibi and connect him to Kubelik's murder. What do you have?"

I told O'Hara word was around that the trigger was wrapping up the job and gave him the accident and suicide. He hit the roof.

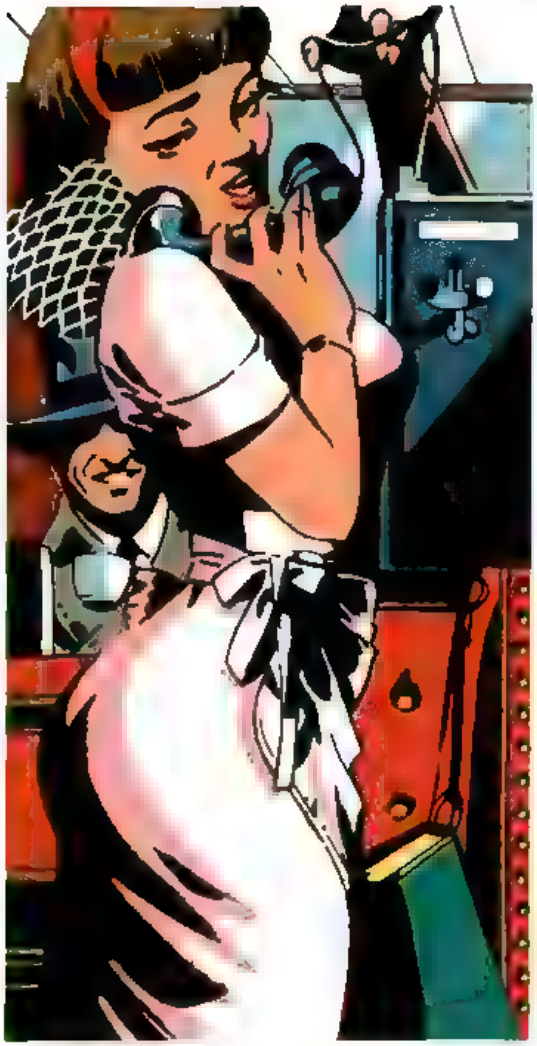
"Goddammit, Chandler! If you're holding out I'll turn that piece of tin you carry into a pair of cufflinks. Give it all to me, or you'll be skip-tracing again by tomorrow night!"

"That's the works. Honest, Tom. I wouldn't fool one of New York's finest."

He made a suggestion about where I could hang up the phone. I told him he was still my favorite policeman.

Judging by the tone of O'Hara's voice, the heat was on from the Mayor's office.

It gave me an idea. I waved Violette over to the booth and gave her a bit part in my life story.



I had her call the record and license division of Manhattan's Marine Harbor Bureau.

"Hello, this is Miss Goodbody from the Mayor's office. His assistant, Mr. John Lathrop Morganstern, should be in your offices. May I speak to him please? Oh, he's not. Well, will you have him call the mayor as soon as he gets there? Thank you."

I decided against the pie, left a two-spot tip, blew a kiss.

I entered the Marine Building at 12:30, about the time that anybody who was anybody was out to lunch. Walking up the stairs, I removed my storm coat, folded it over my arm with the lining outside, and threaded a nifty blue cornflower I picked up on the way into the lapel of my jacket.

I lowered my voice an octave, smiled and said: "Hello! I'm John Lathrop Morganstern. . ." I paused just long enough.

"Uh. .yes, your office phoned; call the Mayor right away."

I used the office phone, kept her in earshot while I faked the call, and used Fiorello's name several times, just like we were old friends. When I hung up, I asked her for the record file on the *Lady Luck*.

She threw a glance at the empty administrator's office and said "We're really not supposed to, but..."

I looked at my watch.

"...I guess it's all right," she said.

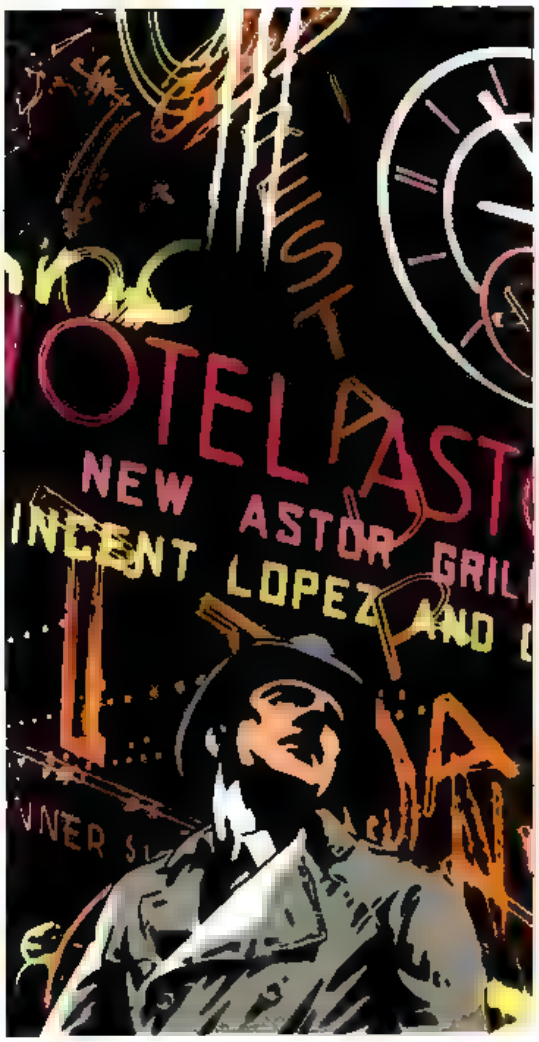
It wasn't.

I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but I'd know it if I saw it. I made a few notes, closed the file, and told the girl there was something fishy about the matter. She gave a slight groan.

I discovered that Kubelik didn't own the *Lady Luck;* he only ran it. The owner was listed as a Mrs. Winfield Crane, with a Long Island address and a couple of phone numbers, one of which had a Manhattan prefix.

The PL-7 number didn't answer, so I tried Long Island and was told Mrs. Crane was not in. I spent the rest of the afternoon at the library. Their city directory gave me a Fifth Avenue address for the Manhattan number.

Then I pulled the papers for the last two weeks and did my homework on the Kubelik job. I also picked up on the accident and suicide Todd had mentioned. The body count was up to eight.



I had an early dinner at the Artists and Writers on West 40th, then cut up to Times Square to see if there was any word on the street about the misfortunes of the *Lady Luck*.

I tried the dives and the top spots, listened to some gossip about it at the Copa Lounge, plied some society clubbers at the Stork Club and 21, and finally wound up in Little Italy

Nobody seemed to know any more than what was in the papers. I spread the word that I'd pay for some answers, and kept calling the Crane number in Manhattan without any response.

I strolled out onto Mulberry Street, flagged a hack, and decided to have a look at the ship. According to the papers, she was docked at Pier 66, with all operations suspended by a court order.

As I ankled along the wharf, I tried to imagine the scene as Todd had described it to me last night.

Kubelik and four others had died on Pier 66 two weeks ago, and the *Lady Luck* seemed like a good place to start. Somebody was certain to be aboard the yacht, so I thought I'd nose around and see what I could stir up. The ship itself was meant to be viewed at night with its colored spotlights and rows of firefly bulb trim.

As I boarded, her decks looked empty but I had a feeling that trouble couldn't be too far away.

"Lookin' for something, Mister?"

"Just sightseeing."

"The ship's closed to business. The *Lady* had some bad luck a while ago. Be a good idea if you did your sightseeing somewhere else."

"Well, that's show biz." I said. "Who's in charge?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Just say a friend of Mrs. Winfield Crane, Cap'n."

He gave me a funny look. I gave it back, and he disappeared down a passageway.

"Hey, sightseer!" the voice called. I took it as an invitation and let it lead me down into the steward's cabin.

The man leaned casually against the front of a desk. A little less casual was the canny, feline glow that burned behind his lidded eyes. The rings on his fingers sparkled as they motioned me into the room. He did his best to place me but couldn't, so we played tag.

"My name's Arnie Danzer."

"Mine's Chandler."

"I told Mrs. Crane this would be pointless, Mr. Chandler, but if you must look around. . ." He fluttered the gems at me again.

"Y' never know." I wondered what he was referring to, and how long it would take him to realize he'd mistaken me for someone else. I remembered that Danzer's name was connected with the Kubelik troops and figured him as next in line. I tried it out for size.

"When are we going to see a little action again?"

Danzer looked at me for a moment, then said:"I thought you were gonna tell me the ship's out of the game for good. Say the word, and I'll pass a bundle along that should grease the heat. Ah, how is Mrs. Crane?"

"Fine. Just fine," I said, and changed the subject. "Just one thing though—we've got to be certain the *Lady Luck's* in the clear, and need some insurance."

"Educate me."

"If any of those witnesses who saw Kubelik get it talk to the cops, you'll be a number instead of a name and ruin the whole operation."

"Me! What the hell are you talking about? HORACE!!"

Horace must have been waiting just around the corner because he was at the doorway in a wink. Horace was nowhere near as big as King Kong.

Danzer reached for the ship-to-shore phone and dialed. He got lucky and reached the number I'd been trying to connect with all day.

"Mrs. Crane? Arnie Danzer. You didn't happen to send a visitor along to see me today? Hah, I didn't think so. No, no problem at all. Sorry to bother you."

Now I had done it. Danzer smiled like the Chesnire Cat and said: "Wrap him up, Horace."

"Be a good boy...Horace?" I jammed my hand deeper into my coat pocket, pointed my finger at Horace the way George Raft did in the movies. But Horace didn't go to the movies.

He crossed the room like a fast freight and threw a right hook that could have crushed a grizzly's skull. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, moved my head about four inches to one side as Horace left the impression of his knuckles in the metal door frame.

The jolt must have shot clear up to his brain because he just stood there and made the letter O with his mouth.

Before he could figure out what happened, I brought my knee up hard enough to double him over and keep him from having any fun for awhile.

A little .25 automatic jumped into Danzer's hand. He said: "Get the hell off the ship, punk, or I'll begin popping the buttons off that coat!"

I still hoped it would work out my way, and knew that nobody wanted more gunplay near the ship. "Better be a sharpshooter, 'cause I'll take a couple from that toy before I get one of these big ones into you! Make up your mind, Danzer. Do we talk or use each other for target practice?"

He reconsidered, lowered the rod and placed it on the table top not too far away.

"No rough stuff.What's the pitch?" he said.

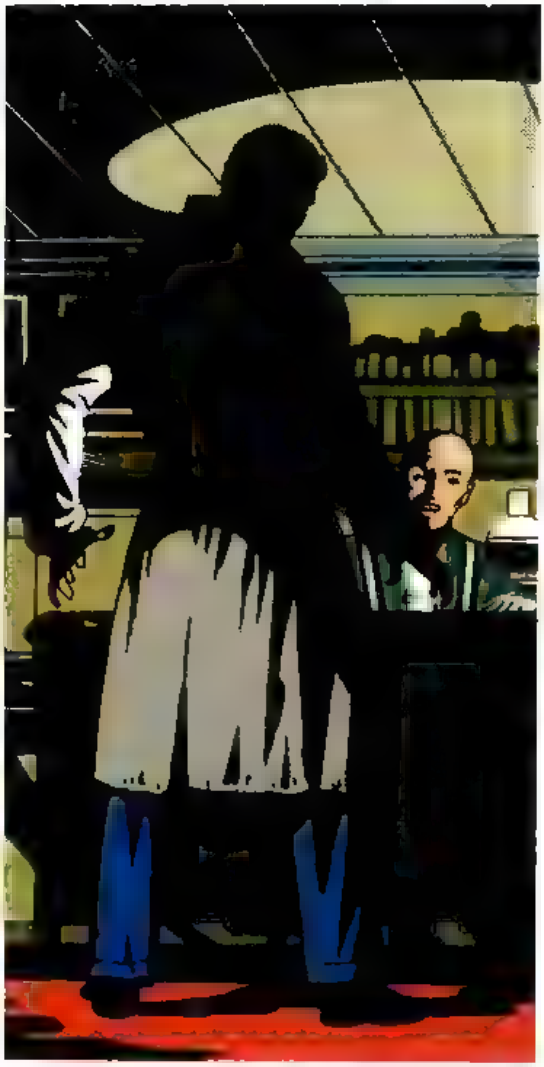
He knew a lot more than he let on, and I knew a lot less than I made out to. Together, they added up to zero. I tried to fake him out anyway.

"You're holding something I want. I'll get it the easy way or the hard way, so hand it over now and do yourself a big favor."

"I get the impression you know nothin'!" he said.

"So maybe I'm psychic."

"So maybe you're the Lone Ranger?"



"Maybe, but I wouldn't be surprised if you fingered Kubelik just to get into his chair, knowing the cops would put all the heat on October with that rival mobster routine right out of an old *Gangbusters* show."

"Their business. They had the crew at the Hall tryin' to play that angle and wound up with empty pockets. All of us were on board the ship that night with dozens of witnesses to prove it."

"Okay, try this one for size. Now that Dewey's got Lepke out of the way, the territory's opening up a little, and Frank Costello, Anastasia and Joe Adonis are looking around for the top talent.

"Let's say Joe October gets syndicate fever and figures he can make a bid for the big time by expanding his own rep and moving in on the *Lady Luck* operation. It has the kind of flash he likes.

"But he needs someone to help him and makes a connection with you.

"The plan gets both of you what you're after, so you help him with the double-cross by giving Big Jake Kubelik the chill where he least expects it—from the inside."

"Sure, October sets himself up as top suspect!" Danzer said.

"Why not, if he really has a solid alibi. He gets rid of an old enemy, takes on the operation, and you get the lead spot."

"The lead spot? Who the hell do you think blueprinted this layout? Kubelik was no mechanic; he imported me to handle the *Lady Luck* set-up for a piece of the action."

"And now you get his slice too. Not bad, but before it's all over, you and Jake are going to be holding hands again."

"You're high as a mainliner, Chandler, dreaming wild."

"Call it a fairy tale, huh?"

"Dirty sonofabitch!"

He started to reach for the gun, changed his mind and tapped a cigarette out carefully with his left hand. I got close, took one and made him match me.

"One mistake is all I need, Danzer. Just one, and I'll bury you along with this whole set-up."

Horace was beginning to get up, didn't look too friendly. "Keep practicing, kid," I said, "I'll let you know when you're good enough."

I reached back for a bottle of brandy, cracked it across the corner of the desk and splattered the widest area possible. I wanted to keep the boys busy on my way out, and flipped the butt into the spill.

"Think of me," I said as a sheet of flame swept across the top of the desk.

The stunt bought me the time I needed to get the hell out of there without a lead escort chewing up the back of my coat.

I placed Danzer in the race. He could easily have left the ship for ten minutes, rubbed Kubelik and returned. My little visit might make him careless.

I decided not to call the Crane number again tonight, knowing I'd be expected—and that walking out might not be as easy as getting in. On the way over to Tenth Avenue, I reminded myself to carry some protection, and whistled down another hack.

It was much too late to catch Walter Winchell on the radio, so I had the driver drop me at Times Square for the bulldog editions of the papers.

I thought of Todd and the 50 hours he had left to live his lifetime—50 hours eroded by the seconds, erased by the minutes.

I turned in an hour later, kept going over it again and again, until I finally drifted off into a restless sleep.

TUESDAY
10:01 AM

The alarm buzzed me awake a little after ten in the morning, but my body told me it was the middle of the night.

I had the Crane number memorized by this time, reached for the phone and dialed it. A few seconds later a sleepy voice answered, but I changed my mind and cradled the receiver. I wanted this one face to face, without the kind of reception that a gorilla like Horace could give an unwanted visitor.

The air had a bite to it and an overcast sky was fighting a losing battle to hide the sun. I walked over to Broadway for breakfast, then took a cab uptown.

It was a nice building, if you went in for palaces. The doorman looked like he'd give Rockefeller a hard time, so I flashed the badge, gave him the building inspector routine and asked him about the violation of Ordinance 477-B. He went back to watching the girls go by.

Upstairs, I was told the Crane residence occupied the top floor.

I stabbed a finger at the penthouse bell, waited a minute and started to try again, when the door opened.

She stood there in a pale negligee the color of an amber whisper that became invisible against the morning light. Her gold hair reached down to touch her ivory shoulders, and framed the kind of silhouette that would always keep men from being at peace with themselves in her company.

We stood there for a moment staring at each other and I wondered what she looked like without the shadows.

"Yes?" she said.

"Sorry to bother you. My name's..."

Suddenly, she reached out, threw her arms around me, buried her face in my neck and whispered, "Chandler."

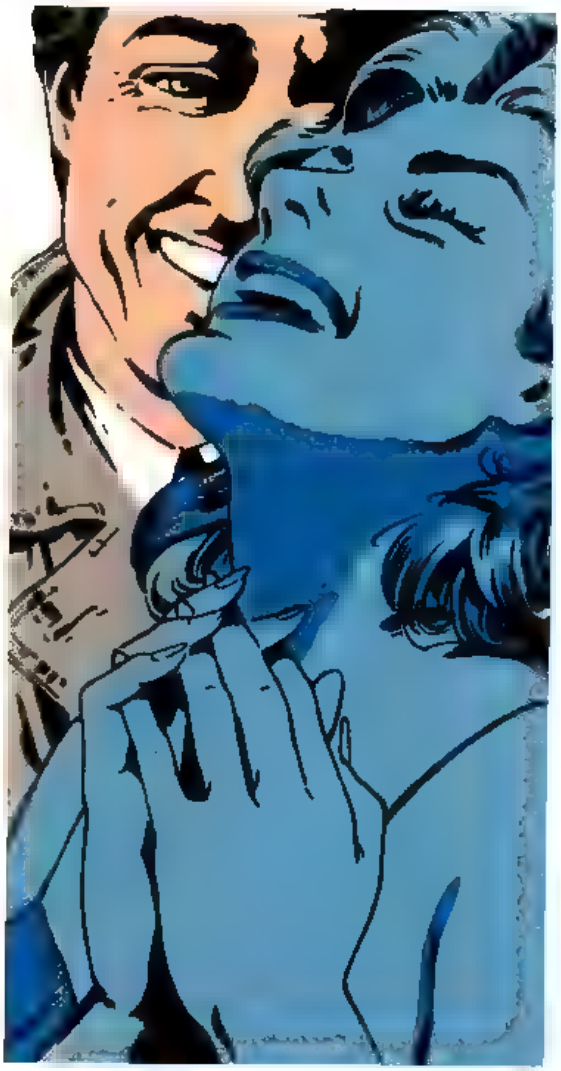
I thought she had mistaken me for someone else, reluctantly pried her away, and faced her toward the light Something inside me clicked.

"Chandler," she said again.

Then I remembered. A wave of recognition swept over me, made my fingers flex involuntarily. Mrs. Winfield Crane was a girl I had been engaged to years ago.

"I'll be da...Ann!"

"You'll be damned if you don't remember. Here's another hint!"



She kissed me again and I remembered more. Her eyes were still as gray as a November dawn, and her smile could turn everything into the Fourth of July. Not a month had gone by in all the years between that I hadn't found her somewhere in my thoughts.

I tried to wipe that stupid look off my face, and say something intelligent. Nothing happened. Then, we laughed together and broke the tension.

"It's been a long time, Ann. Maybe ten years."

"Almost eleven years."

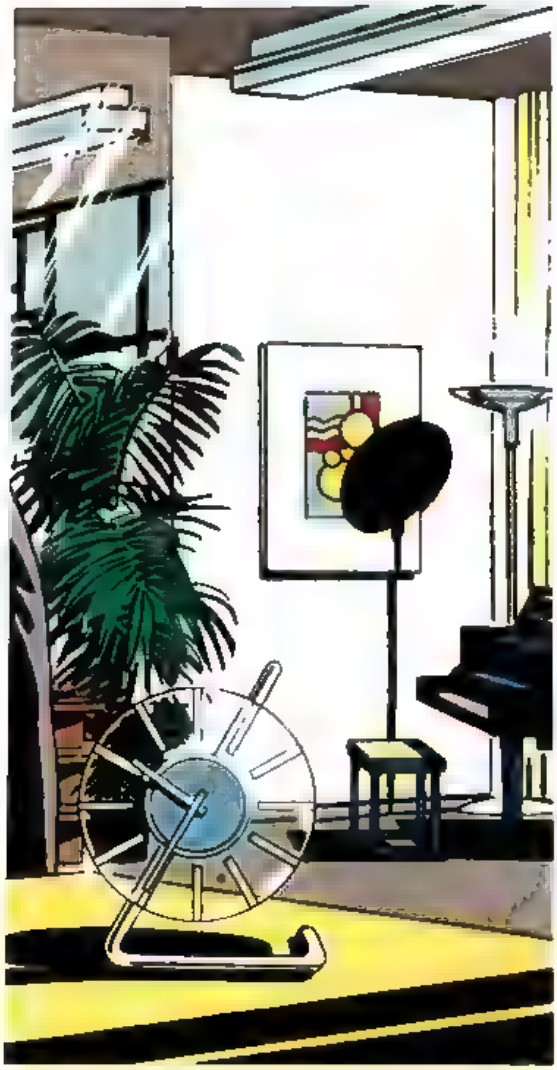
She turned away. "I am sorry," she said. "I never meant to...to end it like that. We were kids." She managed a smile. "Make us a drink. I'll be right back."

It was quite a change from the last time we were together. As I recalled, she lived in a three-story walk-up with hallways as dark as the Tunnel of Love on Coney Island.

Ann had the things that money could buy. The living room was tastefully and expensively furnished, all done in a modern art deco motif.

The walls were painted eggshell white, while the floor was done in beige terrazzo. An expensive Silver-blu mink laid across a leather-covered chair.

The Steinway near the end of the room looked like it was being used as more than a decoration. It sharpened the memories.



I'd met Ann when I was aspiring to be a professional boxer. I'd had a couple of good bouts on a streak that was broken when a pug named Gil Revere KO'd me. Ann was his sister, and she'd taken me out to dinner to make it up to me. We got to be friends, good friends, and went together for about a year that was straight out of a Scott Fitzgerald novel. We started making serious plans.

Then Ann began to work the night club circuit as a singer. She was good and began to make a name for herself, but it put a wedge between us that grew. She was unpredictable, never letting me know exactly where she stood.

Then, one day she was gone—no goodbye, just a note saying she couldn't be tied down, that she wanted a career and all that goes with it. I heard she booked into a big club in Miami. I could've followed, but what for—I got the message.

"How do you like my little hideaway?"

"You could always convert it into a parking lot." I smiled, and handed her a glass.

"I have a place on the Island, but I guess I'm just a city girl at heart. In case you're wondering, my husband died three years ago. I'm a widow."

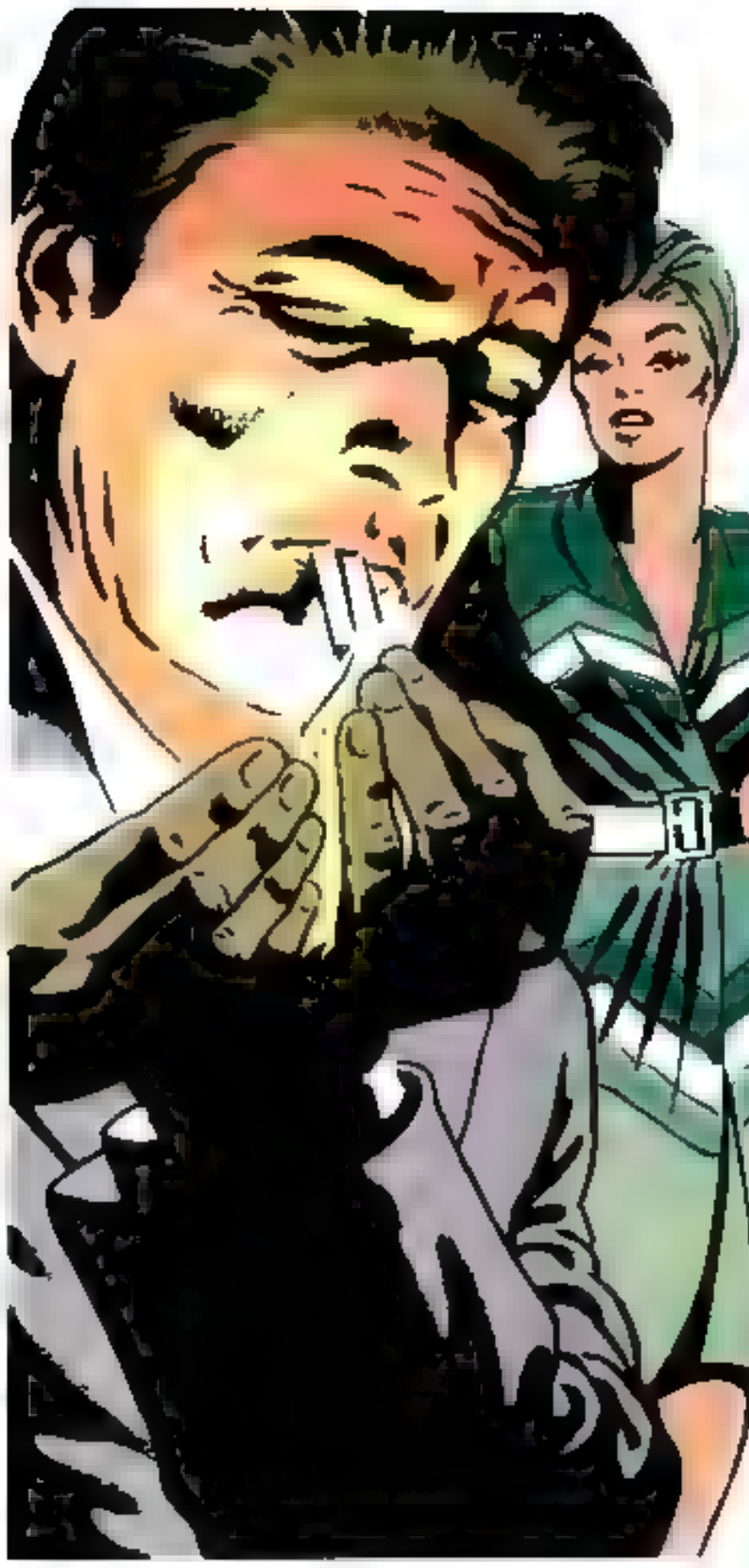
"As some cute copywriter once said, 'the night has a thousand eyes.' I'm one of them, a private detective."

"Here's to crime," she said. "Tell me about it."

"I thought I needed a change of scenery and boxed my way across the country after...we split up.

"Worked my way down to Mexico, fought in the revolution, made a few pesos running guns, and lost them all after Rubio was elected and crushed the movement.

"It took me about a year to get back to Big Town. Then I managed to get a job as a skip tracer for a bail bondsman. I'd had enough fighting to last me for a lifetime.



"After that, I landed a spot as a special investigator with the DA's office, mostly leg work and stake-outs. When the new administration came in, they bounced me, so I had my name painted on a door down on Forty-seventh. Nothin' to it when you know how."

I knew I was talking too much but she let me go on. I'd already played the verse, figured it was time for the chorus.

"I'm here on business, Ann."

"I guessed. It's the *Lady Luck*, sn't it?

"If ever a boat was mis-named, it was her. Now you're going to ask me questions, aren't you?"

I rolled the glass between my hands, made the liquid dance. "Tell me about Jake Kubelik and the gambling ship operation."

"Strictly business. When my husband died, the firm that handled the estate also acted as investment counsellors and recommended the ship as a sound financial venture. It is...or was, until now."

"It's not common knowledge, of course; my society friends might not understand that sort of thing. But we do visit the ship from time to time, strictly on a fun basis, to gamble and spend some money. That's it, nothing more. We've tried to keep it out of the papers; the scandal would be..."

"Yeah."

"You wouldn't. . .say anything?"

Maybe it was the Scotch. I felt my fingers flexing again. "Why don't you just leave a note and buy a plane ticket to Miami?"

I was sorry after I said it, but sorrys never help. It was meant to hurt.

"That happened a hundred years ago. I wanted a career and had one for a few years. Then I met a nice guy, a lot like you. He was wealthy, in the construction business, and after being poor all my life, I wanted the good things. He gave them to me.

"It wasn't that I loved you less; I was young and thought I wanted other things more. I'm different now. It took me a long time to find out that real love is something that comes only after you begin sharing your life with someone. You know how it was with us, we never had the chance.

"I'm glad you're here now. The *Lady Luck* business is a nightmare, but perhaps something good will come from it. I'd like to help you, and help myself too. Please tell me what I can do."

"I'll let you know," I said.

Then she reached out, touched me, and I felt like a frozen man wading into a pool of warm water. I didn't look up. I was afraid she'd see what was behind my eyes.

I walked to the door, turned for one last look. I tried to keep it light, gave a smile and a wink, and was about as successful as a mouse getting out of a trap.

Todd was just sitting there when I got back to the office. Angel O'Day, the girl who looks after Metropolitan Security from nine to five, was taking a late lunch. I picked up a handful of messages, unlocked the inner door to my office, and nodded Todd inside.

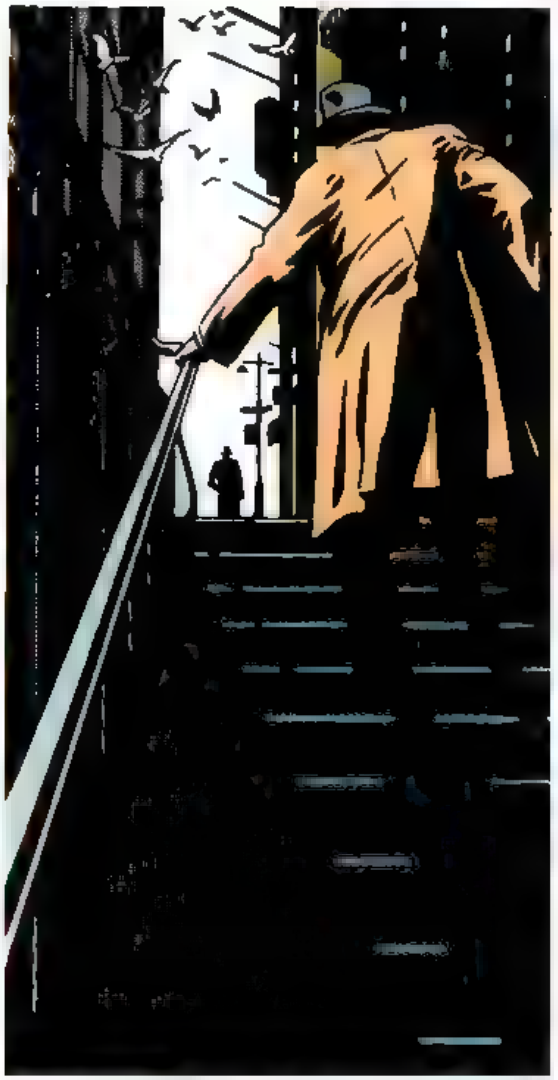
Maybe it was the light, but he looked much better today. Except for the darkness that had crept into his eyes, Todd looked almost normal.

"I hope you don't mind, Mr. Chandler. I didn't want to be alone in my hotel room."

"Be my guest; you're paying the rent."

I told him the way yesterday had gone, and dropped a few names that didn't mean much to him. I reminded myself that Todd had some thirty-odd hours to make his peace with the world. Neither of us mentioned it.

He watched me like a mouse watches an owl. We talked until he finally decided to tell me what was on his mind.



"I bought this," Todd said and pulled a Smith & Wesson out of his coat pocket. He held it like a man who intended to act as both judge and jury. I understood and knew I'd feel exactly the same way. Todd's quiet, pleading manner was giving way to grim determination.

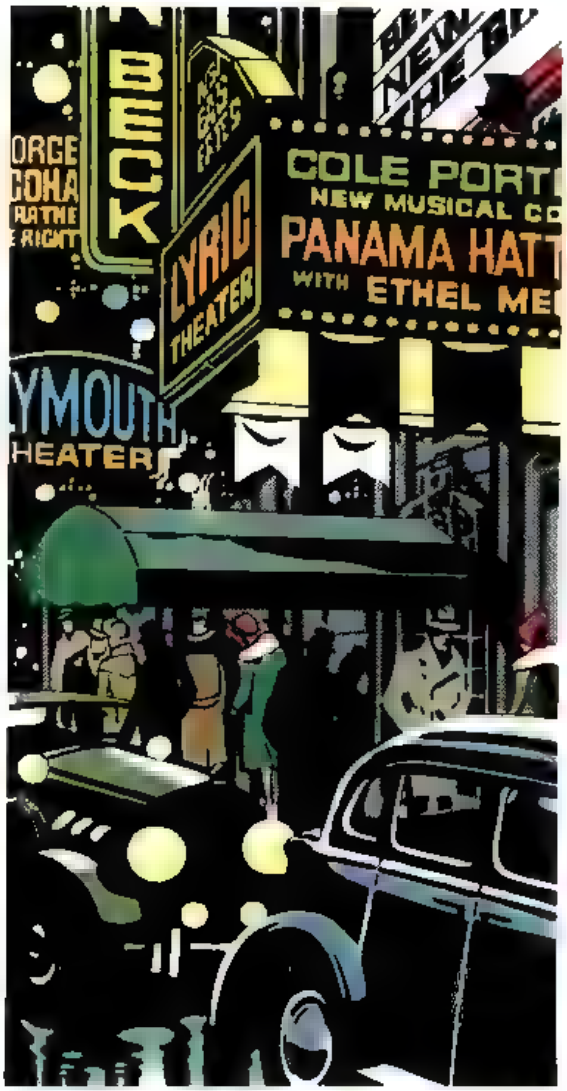
I decided to let O'Day wrap up the rest of the afternoon, and left before she returned. I walked Todd out of the building, and pointed him in the direction of the Great White Way. With a little luck, he might find a momentary diversion.

Soon the street would take on the tempo of the night. Damon Runyon had named this block, 47th between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, "Dream Street," because it held the stage door to the Palace Theatre, the mecca for all vaudevillians. Now its two hundred yards were dismal, run-down. Only the dreams remained. I headed toward my hotel. So did the man in the gray hat.

TUESDAY
8:55 PM

The gray hat was still there five hours later. It was taking an easy stroll up and down the street, and probably not too happy about it because the rain was just beginning to fall.

I'd had a bite to eat on the way back, and decided to hole up for a few hours to try to work out some of the angles. I poured another shot of Scotch before I made up my mind the time was right to pay Joe October a visit.



I took my time getting ready to go out, paced through the lobby a half hour later, and headed east along 44th Street, with my shadow not too far behind.

The Lyric Theatre was emptying its house when I walked by, and the gray hat closed up the distance to keep me in sight. It may have been the break I was waiting for, so I stopped for a moment, and took a look at the tail.

I was no high roller, but I spotted him for one of Tom O'Hara's boys—not that it mattered, but I thought I'd have a little fun at the city's expense.

Since we were playing cat and mouse, I decided to give him a chance to show off and earn a flatfoot's pay. As we passed the Broadhurst, I speeded up my gait, and broke into a short run that ended at the side entrance to the Astor Hotel on the corner of 44th and Seventh.

I glanced back, then bolted through the revolving doors. Before I emerged from the other side, I managed to kick the rubber-bottomed doorstop loose and let it drag to a halt.

A second or two later, the tail jumped into the door and pushed it about a foot until the doorstop decided to get a good grip on the floor. The tail's nose bounced off the glass, and the door refused to let him out in either direction.

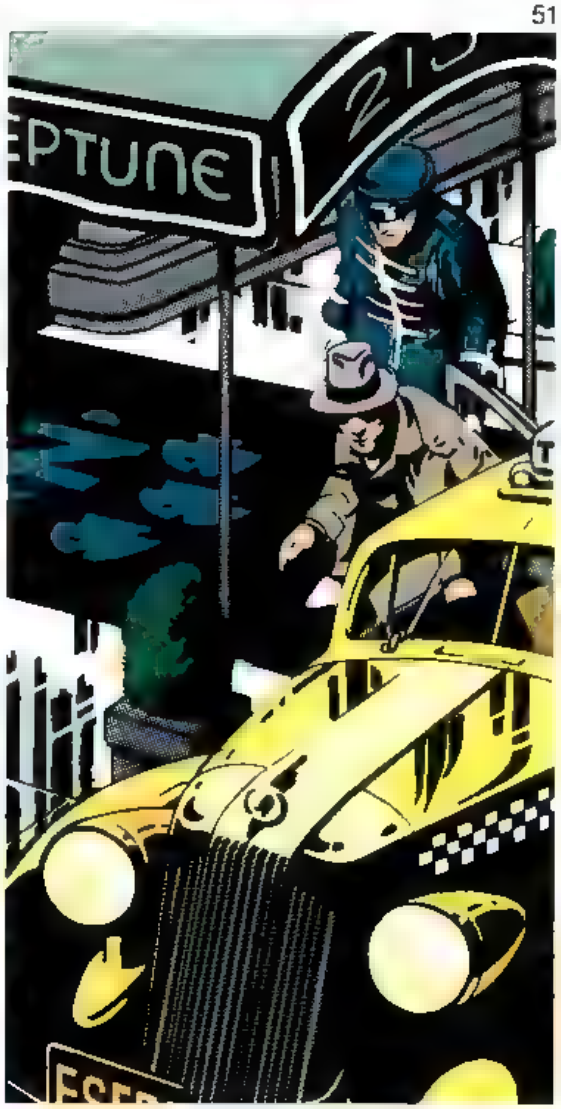
He was probably saying something about my parentage as I turned and took a bow.

I ducked out the Seventh Avenue entrance and found a cab to take me uptown as the hotel manager came to his rescue. I knew I'd hear about it later, probably around the time I'd ask O'Hara for a favor.

The Neptune Club was on 55th between Park and Lex, where I figured I'd have a better-than-even chance to find Joe October.

Times Square was alive, and Broadway had become a wet, shiny mirror, reflecting the grind movie houses, the open air hot dog joints, the souvenir holes-in-the-wall, the dime dance palaces, the shooting galleries and penny arcades where the champagne drinkers rubbed elbows with the dipsos who mixed their cheap domestic wine one to one with grain alcohol

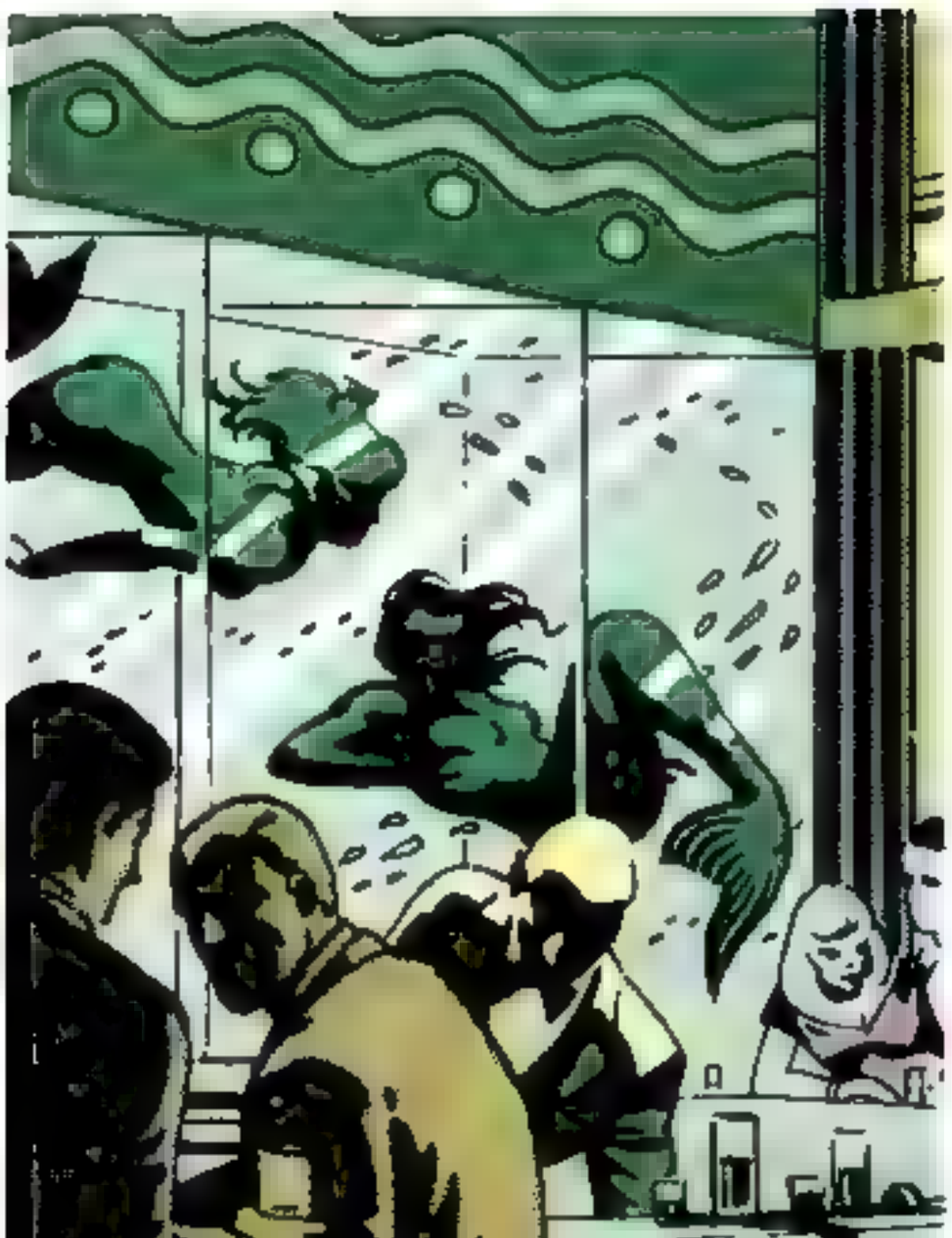
When we stopped, I gave the hack driver a deuce, and stepped out onto



rain-slick asphalt in front of the Neptune.

The doorman was decked out in green trimmed with white, and looked like he'd recently escaped from the Peruvian Navy. He nodded and opened a hammered brass door by a handle cut in the shape of a sea horse.

The foyer was nicely done in a stylized wave motif, had indirect lighting and a carpet so plush it tickled my ankles.



I stopped at the hat check, went down a couple of steps and found a seat at the bar, the Neptune's main showpiece.

It was made of inch-thick polished glass, and built as a circular fishtank, filled with water. The lighting inside showed hundreds of shimmering forms knifing back and forth among the coral and algae. A score of the club's patrons had gathered around it and were bathed in the eerie, lucid glow.

Above and behind the bar, three huge tank sections filled the wall. Inside, a pair of mermaids, complete with tailfins and a handful of strategically-placed scales, swam rapturously about.

The Neptune's clientele was well-dressed, some in black tie. It was a quiet supper club crowd who enjoyed the small combo which played in the room's center.

If Joe October was at the Neptune, he'd probably be upstairs.

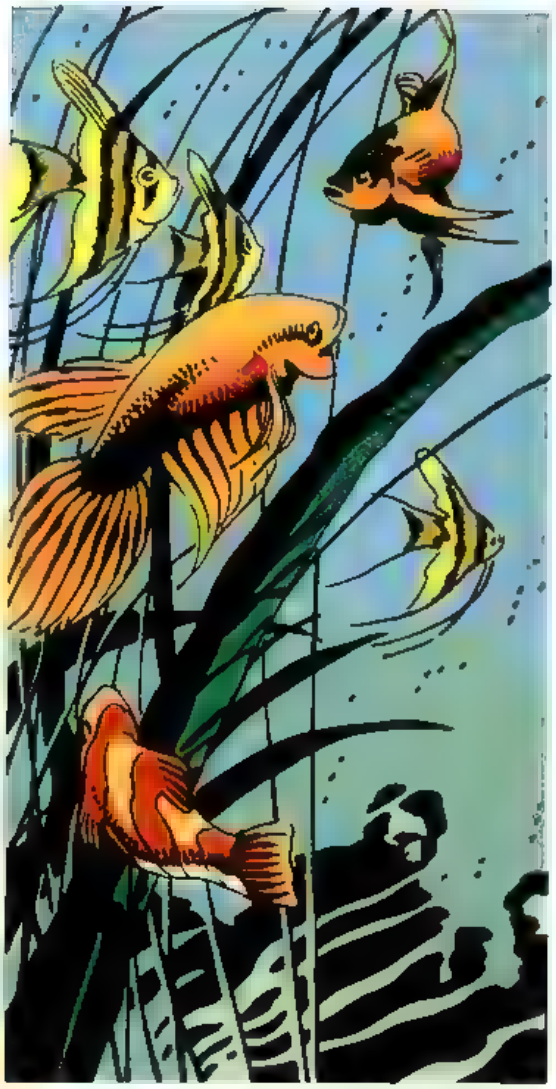
I ordered a Scotch on the rocks, worked at it while I studied the layout.

There were two ways I figured I could earn the grand that Todd had bought me with, and both were dangerous.

I could try to locate the three remaining witnesses to the Kubelik kill and wait out the gun until he found them. Then all I had to do was stop him. I doubted if it was possible in the thirty hours I had left to do the job.

Even if I knew who they were, a wrong guess would buy the other two a ticket to the morgue. Until I got a solid lead, I had to play it another way.

I opted for a more direct approach. By putting the heat on the people who might be involved in the crime, I was setting myself up as a target for the killer. I hoped to force him to make a move and get him in front of my gun.



That was the reason for my visit to the Neptune. Something inside kept telling me it was a sure way to commit suicide.

All the while I kept watching the fish twist and turn, disappear and reappear again unexpectedly. They reminded me of people, of Kubelik, Danzer and October, of Todd, of Ann and myself. I watched them as they crossed and re-crossed.

Then an idea hit me that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck: Suppose Kubelik hadn't died at all? Suppose he had engineered the *Lady Luck* killing with someone else in his place? Could Jake Kubelik still be alive, part of some bizarre scheme? It didn't seem possible—but crazier things have happened.

I finished the drink and figured it was now or never. As the barkeep came over to see if I wanted a refill, I began studying the floor around me.

"What's amatter, sir? Lose something?"

"I don't know—I think I dropped a cufflink around here somewhere. Expensive one, too! Anybody turn one in?"

"Not tonight."

"I better report it to the manager just in case. Who do I see?"

He pointed out a man in a midnight blue dinner jacket with satin lapels. I thanked him, laid a fin on the bar and added. "Would you mind giving him a signal when I talk to him, so he'll know where I lost the cufflink?"

He picked up the note, assured me he would, and I walked across the big room to the man in the jacket who seemed to be guarding a stairway.

I wanted to take a look at the rooms above the Neptune without being announced.

"The barkeep told me to go right up."

The bar man signalled right on cue.

"Mr. October's expecting me."

"I hadn't heard about it," he said, "but if Mike says it's all right, go ahead." He checked to make sure I wasn't carrying any hardware.

I gave the pigeon a smile that he thought was meant to be polite. "Good man," I said.

I padded my way along the carpeted stairs and tried the first door. It was locked.

I tried the next. It opened.

A man stood in the center of the room. He wore a white, single-breasted Palm Beach suit with shoulders some tailor dreamed up, and an ivory silk shirt. He didn't seem very surprised. In fact, it was almost as if he expected me. I started to get that feeling again.

"Come in. . .Mr. Chandler."

There was a soft step behind me, but I heard it too late to turn around. Something exploded at the back of my skull. Then, a whirlpool opened at my feet. I dropped in.

I tried to stop the avalanche that roared toward me, then realized it was all in my head.

Somebody hauled me to my feet, held me there while I tried to convince myself to open my eyes. I figured I'd be able to see again in a day or so, but wasn't sure I wanted to.

My head felt like I'd stuck it in the barrel of a cannon during an artillery barrage, and something wet and sticky was soaking into my collar just behind my right ear.

I dropped to my knees again because staying upright had become very difficult. Someone had been using my ribs for soccer practice. I was smart. I knew I'd been set-up.

Other than that, everything was all right.

October was still there, only now he had three pairs of shoes. None of them seemed to match. He said, "You wanted to see me, Mr. Chandler?"

My tongue felt like it belonged to somebody else. I just grunted.

"We decided to take a few precautions when you visited us, knowing now you like to play with fire."

October had a hot-line to the *Lady Luck*. I wasn't too surprised. It seemed to fit. "Okay, pal. It's your game. You're holding all the aces."

"At least we agree on that point, Chandler. Now, tell me where you fit."

"No secret. Got a client with an allergy to torpedos. He's a public-spirited citizen who doesn't want the reputation of our fair city tarnished. He paid me to find the *Lady Luck* killer."

"Sometimes I wonder about the difference between us. That piece of tin doesn't make you any different than these boys. You make your own rules, just like us."

"Maybe. My gun's for hire and it's not afraid of assassins. Something you might keep in mind, October."

"You're talking yourself into a box, Chandler.

"Jake Kubelik was a creep. I hustled for him years ago when I was a kid, and he set me up. He had me take a rap that wasn't mine. Whoever snuffed him did the world a favor. It should've been me, but it wasn't. I'm taking the heat for it from the cops—but from you, I take nothing! Vito! C-Note! Give him some religion!"

I only saw one of them. He was greasy and had knuckles as big as a juke box. For openers, he backhanded me a couple of times very hard across the face while someone behind me kept my arms pinned. Then his partner took over to work on my kidneys. They did a good job, and I put them on my list of the ten people I'd most like to kill.

I took it standing—and stayed standing, which surprised all of us. It was then that I noticed the Silverblu coat draped over the chair—the same coat I'd seen earlier!

They stood there wondering if I was able to walk, watched as I stumbled in slow motion toward the door of the adjoining room and *pulled it open.*

It was Ann!

I began to boil inside, because I'd been a sap, because I'd been taken the easy way. I'd been aced right out of putting the most obvious angle together. A different kind of anger began to clear my head.

"Christ," I said. "What a sucker. Give me another chance to add up the score. The middle-aged millionairess and the handsome, ambitious gangster. What a pair. . .combining *their assets and eliminating the one* problem that stood in their way. Do I get a merit badge?"

She was about to say something when I cracked her across the face with a blow that sent her against the wall.

"Bastard," she said.

"Call me Chandler."

All I could focus on was Ann. The roaring in my head blanked out the figures who stood nearby.

Then, they caught me from behind. I dropped, twisted out of their grip, kicked C-Note in the gut as hard as I could, and put him away.

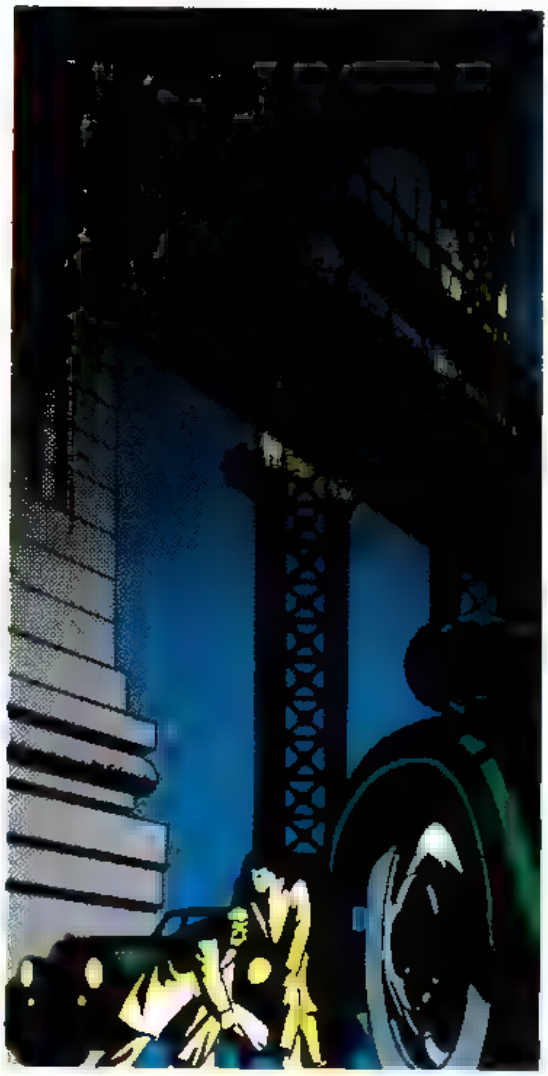
Vito wanted his turn, tried to scramble my brains again with a sap. I caught the swing on my forearm, threw a straight right into Vito's face, but it didn't have much behind it.

He tried the sap again; I grabbed it and we stumbled toward a battery of fish tanks along the wall.

The closest one had a small red sticker on it that said: PIRHANA. I levered Vito's hand into the tank. He really thought I was kidding until he started screaming.

I held the hand as long as I could, but C-Note was on his feet again doing his best to make me let go.

I let go.



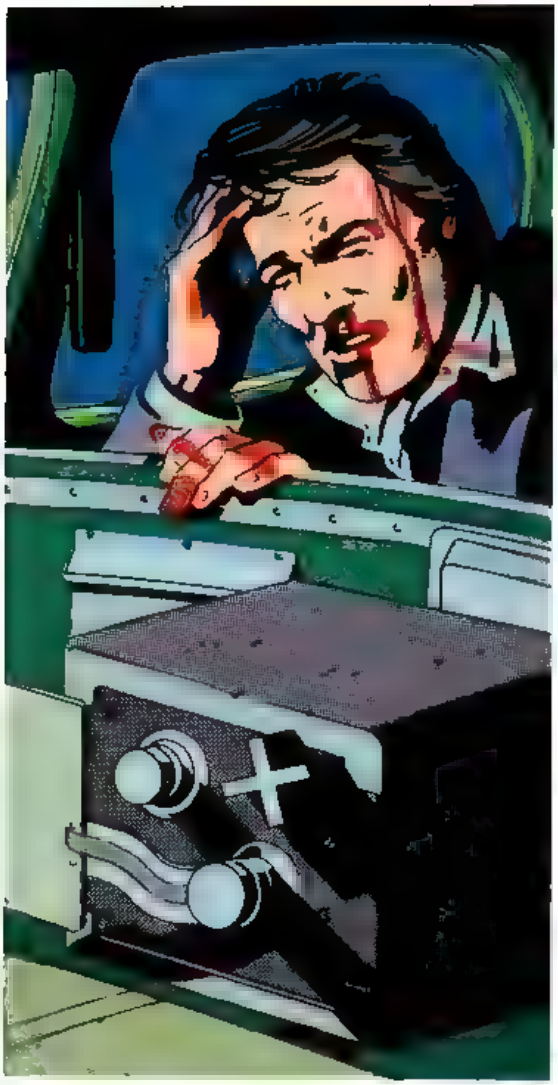
Together the two of them bent me over a big tank and pushed me under the surface. I tried to smash the glass with my head, but it didn't work. Then I tried breathing underwater, and started to choke. I could hear October yelling in the background to get me the hell out of the place now.

They took their time about it and I blacked out.

I think they wrapped me up in a fishnet and dragged me not too delicately down the back stairs and into the trunk of a car.

I faded away again, then came around as I was being lifted out of the car. Something told me they were planning to give me a tour of the bottom of New York's scenic East River.

Suddenly, the whole scene lit up like a stage on a Wednesday matinee. I was dropped on the ground. Somewhere a car engine came to life. It got dark again.



When I came to, my nose was resting on a sign that read: "There's No Place Like This Place Anywhere Around This Place, So This Must Be The Place." It was signed, "Irish McCoy."

I pulled back about a foot and saw Irish McCoy. I was in the back seat of a hack and she was in the front. It worked out better that way

"Well now, could it be Venus emergin' from the sea?"

I grunted.

"You had me worried for a few minutes there, but I think you'll be all right now!"

She gave me a maternal pat on the head which didn't help too much considering what my head had been through tonight.

"I scared 'em off with me headlights, pullin' up like that an' all, so quick. Where is it you'd like to be goin' now—or will the nearest hospital do?"

I gave the address of my hotel and offered her a gold star for saving my life. She said she'd prefer a tip instead.

On the way, she told me that Roosevelt was just what the country needed, that Detroit wasn't making them like they used to, and her philosophy of life which included the qualities of nylon stockings.

I let her talk because she was six foot four and I was in no mood for an argument. I didn't mind; I'd missed Winchell's broadcast again tonight.

Right now it was a pleasure to hear the sound of a human voice—especially when I considered the alternative.

Irish handled the cab like a juggernaut, but I felt as safe as a stack of fifties inside a Brink's truck. I knew that anything in her path would do its very best to get out of the way.

She wheeled the taxi to a perfect four-point landing. I got out, handed her a double sawbuck which I figured was the going price on my life these days.

"See if you can stay out of mischief for a while now."

I told her she was my favorite lady hack driver and she smiled as I waved her into the early morning traffic.

The man behind the desk was chasing some blond through dreamland as I headed upstairs. Somewhere beneath all the grime and dried blood was a human being. I did my best to put him together again.

I found a bottle and downed a couple of tall straight ones, then did a little arithmetic. I was thinking of Todd and how every hour drove another nail into his coffin.

I had 20 hours to find a killer who had come out of nowhere to take the lives of eight people, then disappeared without a trace. Todd's deadline was backing me into a dark and dirty corner

So far, all I had to work with was a maybe.

I needed more eyes, more ears, so I picked up the phone and spread the word to find out if any outside gunmen had been imported into Big Town recently.

I played with the idea about Kubelik still being alive and decided to get back to October for a conversation that wouldn't be so one-sided. I got some measure of satisfaction out of knowing how much he wanted to keep me out of the *Lady Luck* investigation.

Then I had an even wilder idea. I called the classified section of every paper in town with the following ad: "IF YOU HAD A LOSING STREAK WITH A LADY TWO WEEKS AGO, YOU'LL BE OUT OF THE GAME FOR GOOD UNLESS YOU CALL ME NOW. I'LL SAVE YOUR LIFE."

I gave the office number and hoped that three people out of eight million would get the message.

I had another drink, turned out the lights.

WEDNESDAY
4:55 PM

Morning. For me, that is. I had slept through the day and, except for a loud throbbing behind my right ear, felt like I was ready to face the world. The sun was low in the sky and would disappear into New Jersey within the hour.

I showered the cobwebs out of my head, put on a clean shirt, and remembered I'd left my storm coat at the Club Neptune. I put it on the expense account and hit the street about quarter to six.

"No Tell me about it!"

Awwww! I can sing too"

Think you can do an impression of a waitress getting a customer a steak, fries and some coffee?"

"Hum a few bars, maybe I can fake it

Violette was about at par, so I was sure Eddie Cantor had nothing to worry about today I told her she was still my favorite waitress

I took my time getting back to the office. Dusk had spread quickly and

erased all but a few wisps of day from the sky I breathed in the crisp darkness, let it become part of me Moments later, the neon city welcomed the night and the ten thousand souls which emerged from the shadows

Angel had left the usual handful of notes none of which pertained to the Todd case I had missed the ad deadline for the morning papers but my notice would make the afternoon editions already on the street

I figured I'd give it until nine o'clock—then hit the pavement again to find some answers the hard way.

O'Hara had called, left a message about the message I had given the tail last night. I think we understood each other because the gray hat wasn't there tonight. Come to think of it, maybe I should have taken him along with me to the Neptune.

I reached for my keys and discovered the door to my inner office was unlocked. The room was empty, but someone had broken in. It was October's boys. I knew because they'd returned my coat—a warning that said don't come back.

My .45 was still in the desk drawer, apparently untouched, but I wasn't up to taking those kind of chances. I replaced the rounds and the clip, made sure everything worked perfectly. Where I come from, a pistol is a guy's best friend.

The phone stayed sleeping. I took the gun apart again, cleaned it again. I kept checking the time of my wrist watch against the clock on the wall. I emptied the ash tray four or five times, kept straightening out the stuff that cluttered the top of my desk, and started counting the slats in the blinds. I didn't hear the door open or close, just became aware that someone was in the room with me.

"Hello," she whispered

"Get the hell out before I do something we'll both regret."

"You're a fool, Chandler. Why can't you listen and use your head for a change instead of your fists?"

"Take thirty seconds."

"If you want it that way. When you saw me last night you thought I'd deceived you. You're wrong. I was trying to help. . .to help myself and to help you. I went to the Neptune because it was the only thing I could think of.

"I've seen Joe October frequently at the Copa and the Stork Club, even at the Neptune, and thought I might be able to find out something, anything.

"I was trying to help. I didn't know you'd be there. I didn't even know what was going on until you opened the door.

"I know you don't trust me. ...I don't blame you for it, but it's the truth, whether you believe it or not. Sorry it turned out like this."

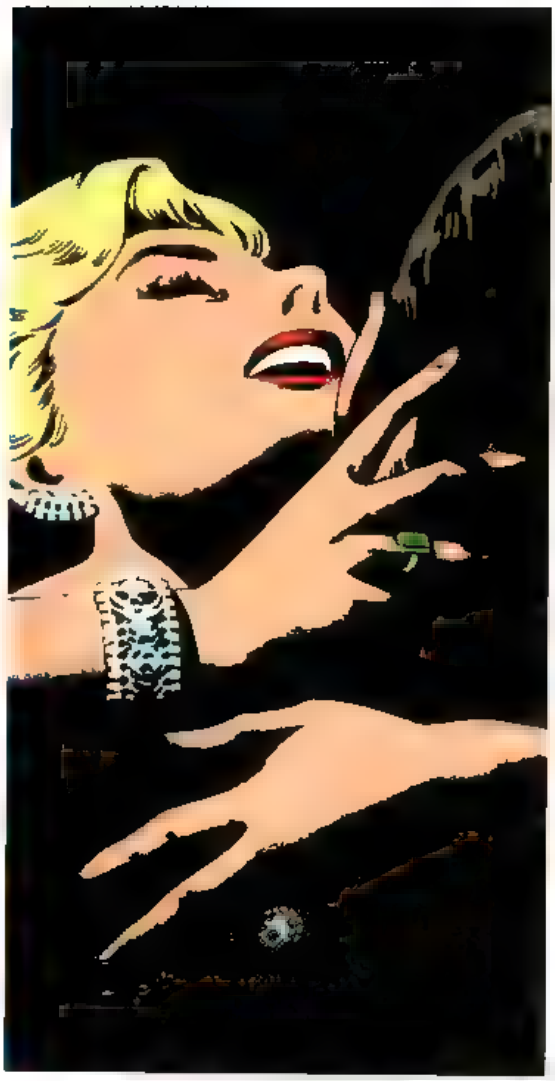
She took a step backward, turned towards the outer door.

"Ann...damn it, wait! Why didn't you say something? Why didn't you let me know?"

"I tried. After I thought of the idea, I tried to reach you and left a message with your secretary."

I scattered the notes on my desk. It was there. Somehow I had missed it. I felt sick.

"You're right. I lost my head. When I saw you and October..."



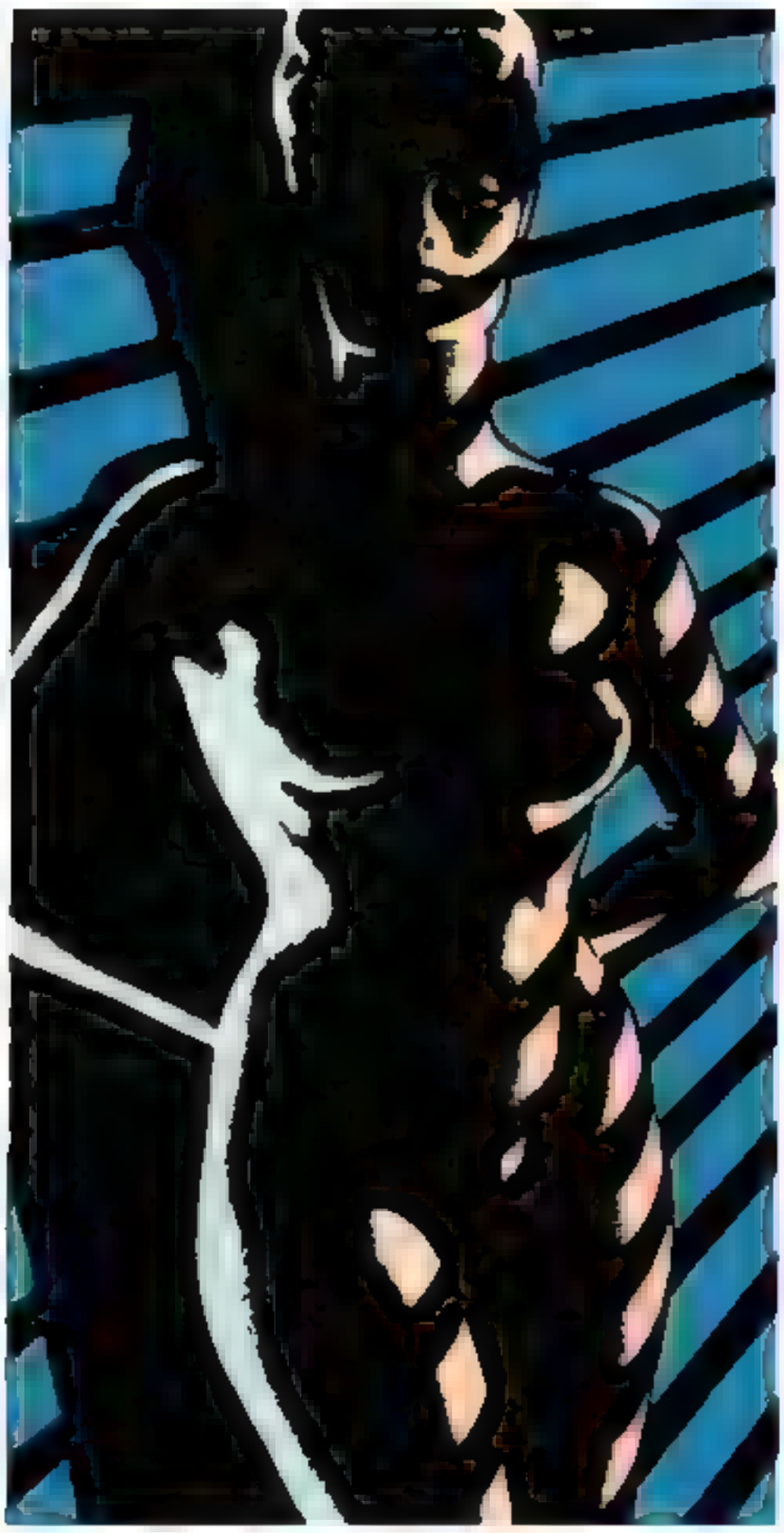
She raised her hand, touched the side of her face. The bruise showed through the layer of makeup she had used in an attempt to cover it.

"You always were hot-tempered, but I didn't mind. . .remember? When you hit me, there was more than anger behind it. I didn't know there was anything left, didn't think it could make any difference to you . . .until now."

A barrier between us dissolved. Nothing else seemed to matter but the two of us. We were kids again and had somehow found the past. I held her hard against me, gave her a kiss that had waited eleven years.

Her heart raced and a fire ignited in her eyes. She held on tightly and pressed against me and told me everything there was to tell without saying a single word.

Then she let go, walked to the office door and locked it. A switch clicked off and allowed the night to enter the room.



The city offered its dim rainbow of color as Ann slowly opened the zipper which held her gown together. It slid from her body along with a few other things until she stood naked in the center of the office.

Her flesh shimmered like alabaster in the twilight of the room. Her breasts were lush and pointed, accentuated by the perfect curve of her waist and the taut firmness of her stomach.

Her legs tapered seductively and as she turned slightly, the natural valleys of her body became a symphony of shadows, held the memory of a thousand secret passions.

"We can never go back, Ann, never be like we were..." She put her hand to my lips.

"Only ask yourself if it's too late now."

While I was thinking she said, "Make love to me."

Reality swept away and the night became a fantasy that turned strangers into eternal lovers. When the dream ended, it was cushioned by the pale darkness that surrounded us.

My mind raced with the events of the past two days, their jagged edges refusing to fit together.

"Stay out of it, Ann," I said. "Promise me. There's a red tide coming that'll drown all of us."

She held me again for a few moments, then let me get dressed. I found a pack of Luckies, got one going. It was past nine and I figured the newspaper angle was a bust. The answers I needed waited for me in the night.

I climbed into the shoulder rig when the phone snarled in my ear The voice said he had read the notice and wanted to hear more. I spelled it out carefully and tried to set up a meet, but the voice didn't go for it.

I didn't blame him. I suggested a call to O'Hara would verify my status as a good guy. The voice agreed, and called back ten minutes later. I was told to ask for Lou Vesco at the Hotel York on Canal Street.

This was the break I was waiting for. As I fished two extra clips out of a drawer, I dialed Todd at the St. Moritz. He was picking up the tab, I didn't want him to miss the show.

"Todd! I just found one of the witnesses. He's cagey, but he's ready to talk if it'll save his life. I've set up a meet downtown."

He thanked me and said he'd be right down. I told him like hell he would, and he said he'd bankrolled the action and wanted something for his money. He said he'd get us there quicker in his car and could be here in five minutes. I owed him a round and said okay if he played it my way, but he'd already dropped the phone. I figured if it got rough, I'd stash him in a nice quiet corner.

"So this is what a bloodhound looks like when he gets the scent!"

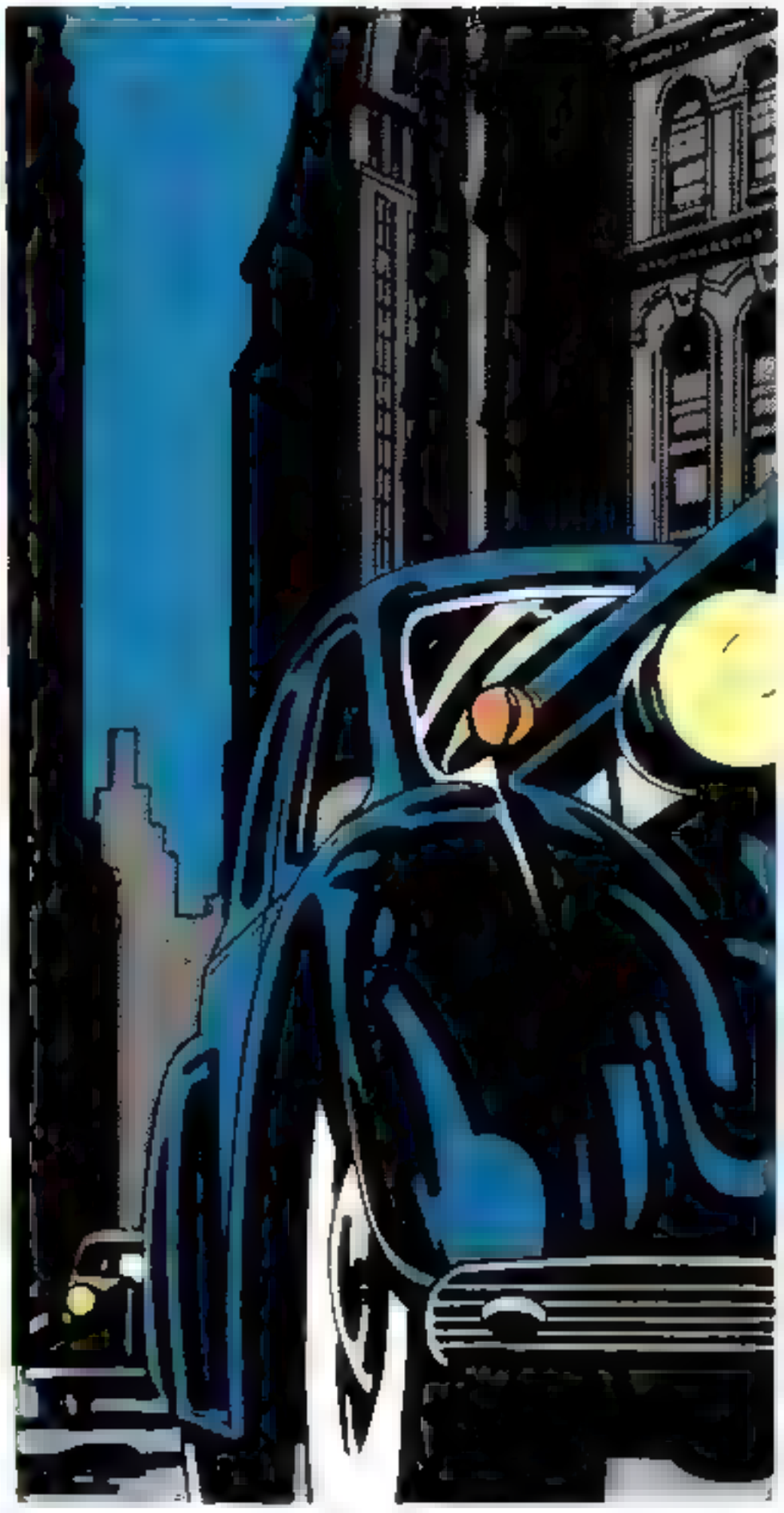
"Fascinating, ain't it?"

"Don't tease me. I'm worried. It... it's all happening so fast."

"That's the way it is sometimes—and when it comes, it's not very nice. I said you might be better off like you were."

"Did you? I guess I wasn't listening."

She stood up, wrapped herself around me one last time. I tasted her mouth, bit her gently.



The '38 Buick Coupe Convertible slid into the curb like Babe Ruth making home plate. Todd was on the gas pedal before I could settle inside. I told him to take it easy and head downtown, but he lead-footed it anyway, cut crosstown to Ninth Avenue to miss the evening traffic, then turned the car south.

Too bad neither of us noticed the Pontiac sedan that made the same turn a half block behind.

I guess I didn't expect it, but Todd's hunting blood was up. I couldn't help thinking that he seemed more alive now than he had been for a long time.

I filled him in on the high points of the past day and what might be expected tonight. In the meantime, the Pontiac was closing up the space between us. As we hit a series of green lights, it pulled alongside. We saw the big sedan too late

The black muzzle of a Thompson peeked over the door sill and sent a hail of lead dancing around the inside of the car.

The windows spider-webbed and showered us with glass splinters. Todd surprised both of us. Instead of running or braking, he rammed the big car and jogged the killer's aim. A bullet nicked his forehead with a mean-looking red slash that wasn't as bad as it appeared, and cracked his glasses.

I got off a couple shots to hold up my end of the conversation, but wasn't saying too much. Todd tried to protect himself by squeezing below window level. I cursed myself for not being able to see who was inside the car and it dropped back.

Todd stopped about a half block later. "My God," he said. "They play for keeps."

It seemed a bit out of character for him, but under the circumstances, I believed it.

"What the hell difference could it make to me."

He acted like a man with nothing to lose. It seemed about right. I said: "They may be back; let's split up."

I wanted to get Todd out of the way. The killer had me in his sights now and I didn't want anything between us, least of all a client.

I told him to zig zag across town and meet me at the York. I'd take a hack and draw their fire if necessary.

I hoped it wasn't necessary.

I had the choice of confronting the hit man or maybe saving the life of a witness. I opted for the latter, but stayed where I was for a few minutes anyway in case they decided to make another pass. They didn't.

I hailed the next cab that came along and watched for the big car. It didn't show.

Fifteen minutes later, I was standing in the lobby of the York. Vesco was in room 3M. I was glad I had told him not to open the door to anyone but me, and headed up the stairs two at a time.

Vesco could be the key to the whole problem. If I had to, I'd take his place and wait for an assassin who seemed to know all the moves of the game.

I knocked on the door of 3M, called Vesco's name and told him who it was. Nothing happened.

I repeated it. Still nothing.

I started to sweat

It was going wrong. Then, from inside the room, I heard two short coughs. I recognized the sounds; they had been made by a silencer.

I tried the knob and the door opened. I jumped into the room, hit the floor and came up with the .45 in front of me.

Vesco was there, all right, only he wasn't about to do much talking. He was face down, giving the floor a new paint job. I checked his pulse, dead.

The window on the far side of the room was letting in the cold night air. I reached it and started checking the fire escape, knowing damn well I was framed by the light behind me.

He was waiting for me somewhere in the shadows below. A bullet sang against the cement a few inches from my face.

I stabbed a shot downward at his gun flash but he was already gone from the spot.

I followed the fire escape into the dark bottom of the canyon between the buildings. Though I was silhouetted against the night sky, the silencer no longer used me as a target.

Then there was a shot from an adjacent alley, and I turned the corner to see Todd crumpled beside his car. He was clutching the Smith & Wesson in his hand.

The killer was out of sight, and as I bent down, Todd stirred. "I saw him. He came right at me! I...I wasn't sure what was happening until I saw his gun, then I pulled the trigger. He knocked me down, but I may have shot him." Suddenly, Todd doubled over. "It's the poison!" he said as he started shaking.

I helped him to his feet, told him to go back to his hotel, and made my way into the lobby of the York again. The howl of sirens began to get louder.

I told the manager about the body in 3M and said I'd wait there for the police. I flashed my shield upstairs and herded the crowd out of the room.

I checked Vesco's topcoat and went through the dresser but nothing said anything to me. I searched the body next. Still nothing. Then, I realized he had no money, no wallet.

The message came through loud and clear. Vesco looked like a sharp dresser, a ladies' man, and probably had a companion with him aboard the *Lady Luck*. Her name and picture would have been in the wallet.

With any luck, the killer had found his next victim.

There was still a chance to head him off, but the Vesco kill would take hours with the bulls—and there were no hours to spare. I was on the fire escape as they entered the room.

Over sixty-five hours had passed since Todd had walked into my office and given me three days and a thousand dollars to find the man who poisoned him.

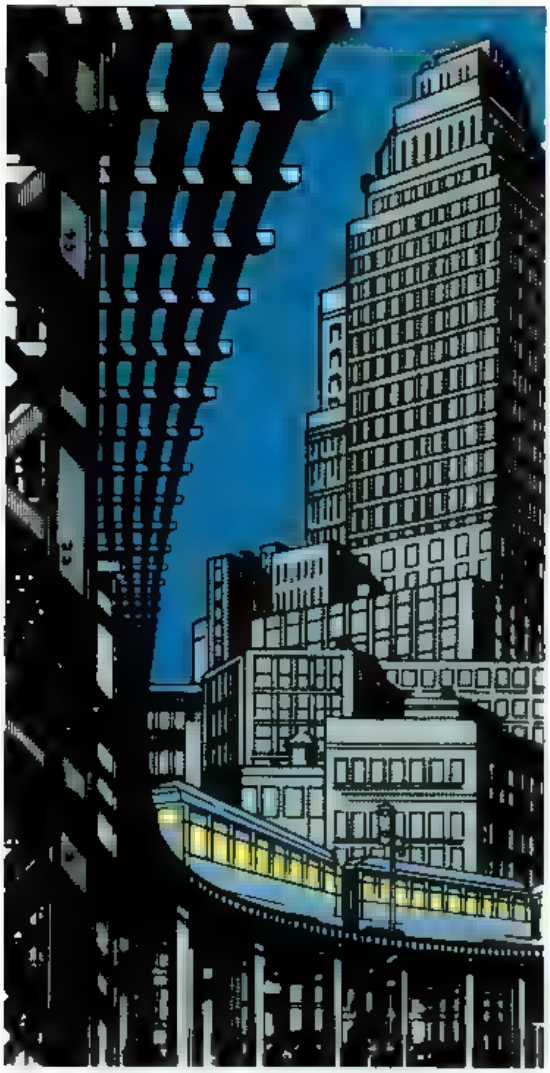
I was racing the clock against a killer who had time on his side and an armful of .45 caliber death to back him up.

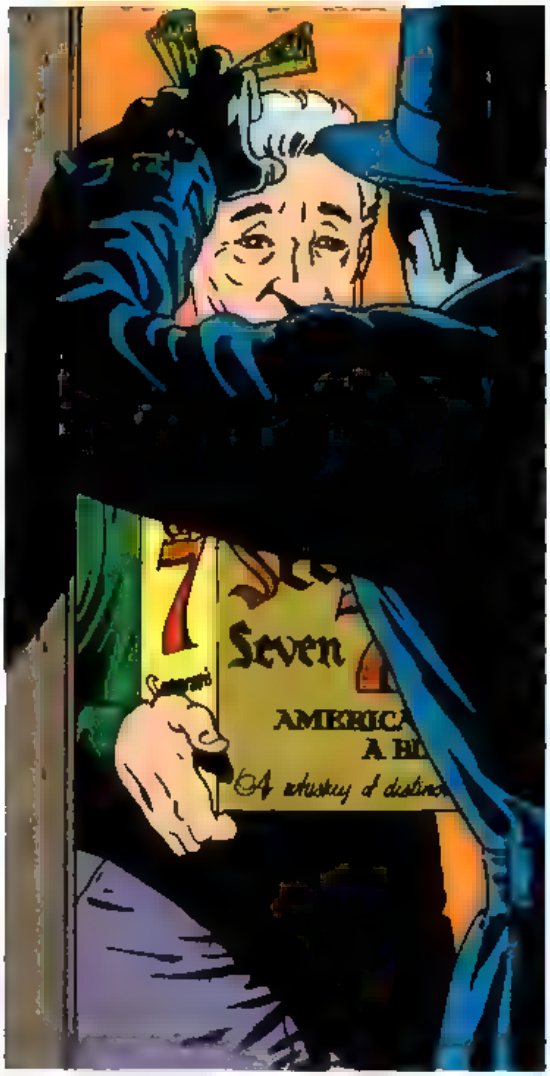
I wondered if it had been more than a coincidence that we found Vesco at the same time, or if he had planned it that way for some reason I couldn't figure.

Why had the killer tried to drill me on the way to Vesco's hotel, then let me off when I was an easy target on the fire escape? It was another one of the crazy things in this case that just didn't add up

I knew when I had the answers I'd have the killer in my gun sight.

My one chance was to know more about Vesco, so I checked the phone book and found a listing for him in the Bronx.





They say there's never a taxi around when you need one, and I was beginning to believe it. I took the Third Avenue El, changed at Lexington for the IND line to get to the Grand Concourse. I was there in a little over thirty minutes, just enough time to imagine what O'Hara was going to do to me.

I had a two block walk to Vesco's place, and passed a small liquor store that gave me an idea. I found an empty Scotch carton outside, dropped a couple bricks in it to give it some weight, and toted it away.

A few minutes later, I was ringing the super's bell.

"Evening," I said. "Got a birthday present here for my brother and he doesn't answer the bell. I was wondering if you'd take care of it for me."

The super said he would, then I had a better idea—we could surprise him by leaving it in his apartment. A fin convinced him

We went upstairs and he opened the door. I turned on the lights and said:"I'll put it on the bar where he can't miss it."

I had a lot more excuses ready, but didn't need them. A picture frame perched on a little deco coffee table told me what I wanted to know.

"Gee, I haven't seen Connie in years. You know her?"

Then I got real lucky. Connie was Connie Burns and she just happened to live in the same building. She was probably Vesco's mistress. I thanked the super, rode him down to the lobby and pretended to leave.

Three minutes later, I was knocking on Connie Burns' door. It was late but she was still up. She opened the door but kept the chain on, asked me what I wanted.

"Lou told me to drop in. I just left him and he said to wait for him here."

"You're lyin', mister! Lou'd never do that. Besides, he had something to do in the city tonight that was kind of important. He never sent you here! If he did, he would have called."

"Let me in, Miss Burns. This is kind of important too—especially if you took a boat ride a couple weeks ago."

Her eyes widened, she got scared, real scared like she couldn't get her breath. "I'm gonna yell for the cops if you don't get your foot out of the door right now!" she said.

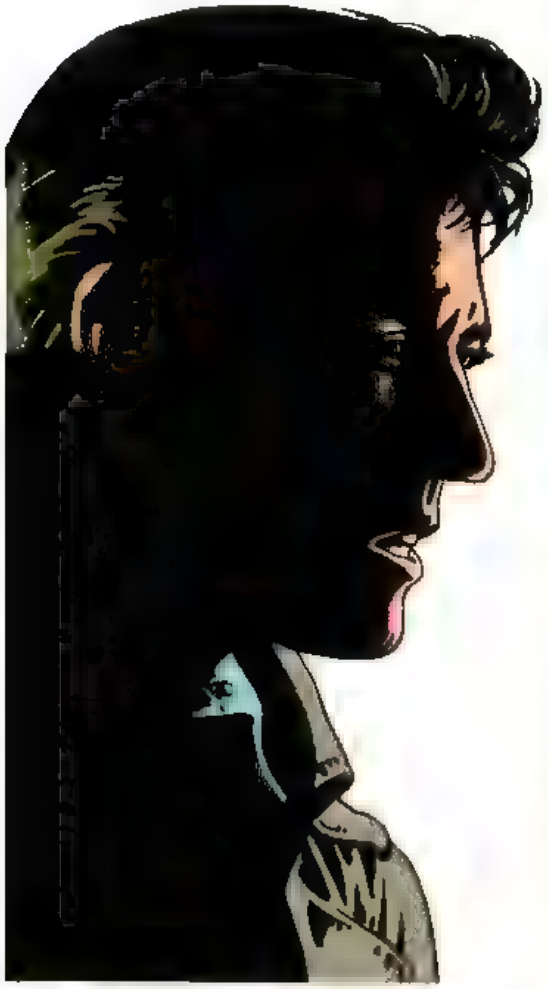
"I'm trying to help you, Connie. Believ..."

She started to scream, and I had no more time to be polite. I shouldered the door open, busted off the chain latch, put my hand over her mouth. She kept trying to scream; I made like I was going to belt her.

"Shut up," I said.

She shut up.

"I'm on your side, Connie. I'm the guy Lou was going to see tonight."



She wasn't the smartest broad in the world, but the "was going to" got right to her.

"Sorry, Connie. Someone got to him before I did. There was nothing I could do. He snuffed Lou and he's coming here next, unless I stop him."

She was half in shock, but she settled down enough to talk after she realized I wouldn't hurt her.

She said she might know the killer if she saw him again, but I was more interested in her safety and the final witness.

"No, I don't know who she was," Connie said. "All I remember is the way she dressed...and the kinda silvery fur she wore."

A silvery fur. It was the coat, Ann's coat. Mrs. Winfield Crane was the last witness!

Before either one of us could say anything, she looked up behind me. Suddenly it got dark again and the floor swallowed me whole.

WEDNESDAY
11:44

The loud noise that woke me gradually dwindled to a volcanic roar, and getting up hurt more than laying down.

My head felt like a bass drum in the Macy's Day Parade as I reached around to touch the back of my neck at the skull. It was soft and swelling and it hurt like hell.

I thought of the time and my watch said I'd been out for a few minutes. The roar passed like a subway you miss at rush hour.

As the floor began to settle down, I saw her. She still looked as scared as she did before the lights went out except for one very small thing—her left eye was missing.

The other one stared, without seeing, at the gun I was holding in my hand. It was my gun.

The barrel was still warm.

I swore out loud and realized what had happened. A wave of anger replaced the pain in my head, and I swore again.

It didn't take an Einstein to figure out the killer had simply walked in on us, put me out of commission, used my cannon on the girl and planted it in my fist. No frills, just the essentials.

Before I could curse my carelessness again, there was a commotion in the hall, and the apartment door burst open. A trio of bulls barged in and found me standing over the corpse with the murder weapon in my hand.

"Goddammit, Chandler; you really did it this time, didn't you?"

Before any of us could say a word, Tom O'Hara elbowed his way through the group.

I tried to say something.

"Just keep your mouth shut. I warned you about this stuff the other day, but you had to be tough about it. Okay, tough guy, you got trouble. You just hung yourself."

"You know better'n that, Tom."

"I'll tell you what I know, wise guy; I know the commissioner's been on my neck and now I have to hand him this. Okay, I'm giving him a private dick named Chandler too. There's a cell with your name on it!"

He pulled the gun out of my hand, ejected the clip, pumped the chambered cartridge onto the table top.

I told O'Hara that I'd left the York to prevent this from happening One of the bulls put in a call for the wagon.

I did my best to explain that there'd be another corpse before the night was over unless I was on the street. Nobody listened.

Why should they? I'd just been hung with the sweetest frame ever dreamed up. I'd skipped out on the Vesco kill, entered his pad illegally, broke into Connie Burns' apartment while she was screaming copper, and was found with her blood on my hands.

"Okay, Tom. I'll give you the whole package. Let's make a deal."

"Maybe later. You don't seem to get it Chandler. You're not goin' anywhere, except to the Tombs."

I dragged a Lucky out of its pack, matched it, and layed the lit end against the ejected slug on the table as casually as I could.

I kept up the verbal barrage and edged to the side of the group while I tried to figure a hundred-to-one shot. I felt like a man in quicksand trying to squirm his way out.

Then the fireworks began. The heat from the butt set off the slug with a deafening roar. The group jumped up in time to see me tilt a heavy bookcase over. It pinned them to the floor and would keep them there for a minute or two. I grabbed my gun off the table and got the hell out of there.

I hit the fire stairs like a greyhound after a rabbit, caught the elevator two floors below, and rode it into the lobby. There was a confusion of activity going on, and I acted like I belonged there as I ambled through the front doors.

I flagged the first hack that came by and got back to midtown without a hitch. Two cabs later, I was at Ann's Fifth Avenue address.

This time, I gave the doorman my name, he checked and sent me up. Ann was waiting.

"I heard about the shooting on the radio. They said someone was killed! I was afraid that..."

I grabbed her, dug my fingers into her flesh so hard she went pale with the pain. I knew it, but I couldn't stop myself. Then I realized I didn't want to.

"I want it, Ann! I want all of it, right now!

"I know you were there when Jake Kubelik was rubbed. One of the witnesses gave it to me just before she died. Now all of them are dead, slaughtered, and I couldn't stop it. I was right there and I couldn't keep it from happening.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me what was going on? I could have saved a couple of lives. Instead, I caught the big frame with a pair of corpses fingering me for the kill. I'll have to take a fall unless I find the man who did it.

"It's all out now, and there's nothing left except you and me—and a hood with a gun who won't stop pulling the trigger until we're all dead.

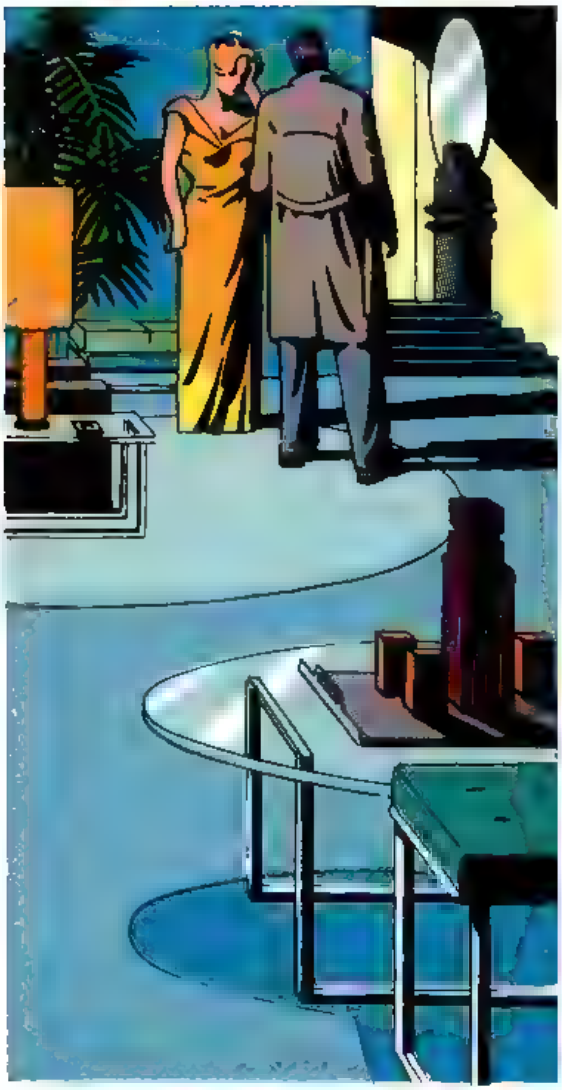
"Give it to me now, damn it, or we'll all go down together!"

She stared at me for a long moment and I watched the fear etch across her face. It wasn't pretty. Then, she began to sob. She admitted it all: she was there on the *Lady Luck* that night and had witnessed the Kubelik job.

She said she knew it was wrong, but she was afraid to come forward and implicate herself in the murder. As Kubelik's partner, Ann would be suspected of a double cross.

She realized her social position would be ruined if all the facts came out, and she might even be tied into the kill. She had her attorney pay off the cops to keep her name out of the official records and away from the newspaper boys. It had all worked, only too well.

Then, at the Neptune, she said she'd found out the witnesses were being eliminated one by one. She planned to tell me about it in my office, but the call from Vesco came in and prevented it.



I wanted to get Ann out of there, hide her away in some safe place. She stopped me.

"I think I know who's behind it. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about this before, but I just didn't understand all of it. Danzer's the man you want!"

She said that Kubelik had contacted her several years ago and forced her to bankroll the gambling ship operation under the threat of blackmail. She had no choice.

Danzer had the blackmail material now, was using it to keep her silent. She said she had proof that Danzer was stealing from the ship's take and that Kubelik probably knew about it. If so, Danzer was being measured for cement shoes

"So Danzer decided to hit first," I said, "hoping to move into Big Jake's spot later."

"You're the only one I can trust. Please get the papers for me. It...it means everything."

She told me that Kubelik kept them in a small reddish brown envelope, hidden somewhere on the ship, maybe in the safe.

Sure. I'd see what I could do, but it seemed like a very minor detail. I thought of Vesco, Connie Burns and the other witnesses. I thought of Todd and of the almost seventy hours that had lapsed since he came to me with the story.

For Todd, it was all over. His time had run out.

"Stay here. Keep the place locked, and don't let anybody in."

I had to get aboard the *Lady Luck*, the one chance I had of clearing myself and settling the score for Todd and the others.

Ann got close again for a minute, put her lips against mine. Then I was on my way downstairs.

I left by the back door, and wedged an empty match pack into the door frame to keep the lock from closing completely. The nearest pay phone was a block away. I called Todd.

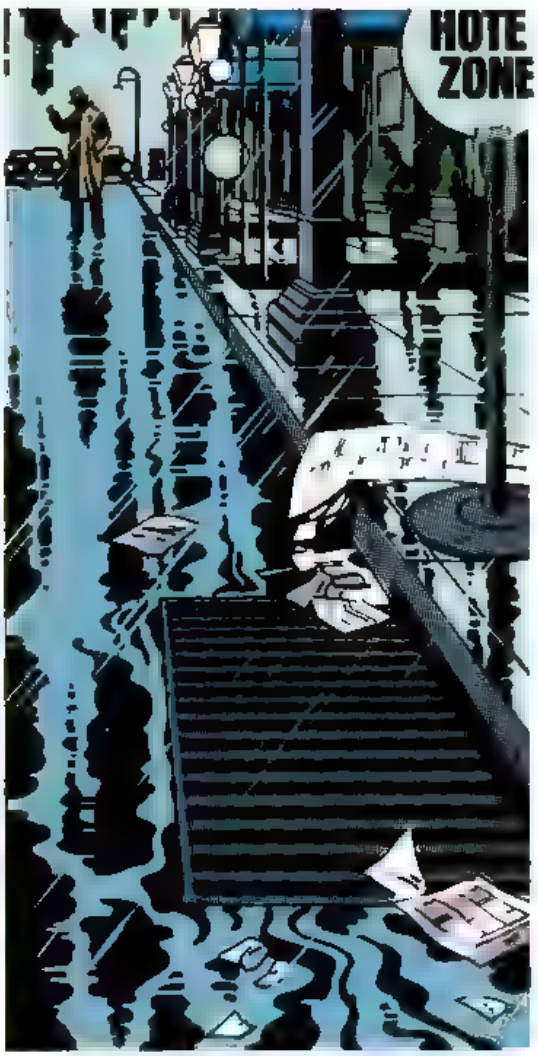
The phone rang a long time before he picked it up. He was breathing heavily, like there was a great weight on his chest. I told him I was close by and wanted to stop in. He said he'd be there.

The St. Moritz was a short cab ride, and I was knocking on Todd's door within minutes. A voice said it was open.

Except for a small lamp, the room was dark. Todd sat in a chair in front of a window that overlooked the park. He was very quiet and never looked at me as we talked.

I told him what had happened after the business at the Hotel York, but left out the part about Ann as the last witness. I said I'd nail the killer within the next hour or two.

"That may be too late, Mr. Chandler. But why should it be any different now? I've been late for everything my entire life. It doesn't surprise me. I knew it would work out this way.



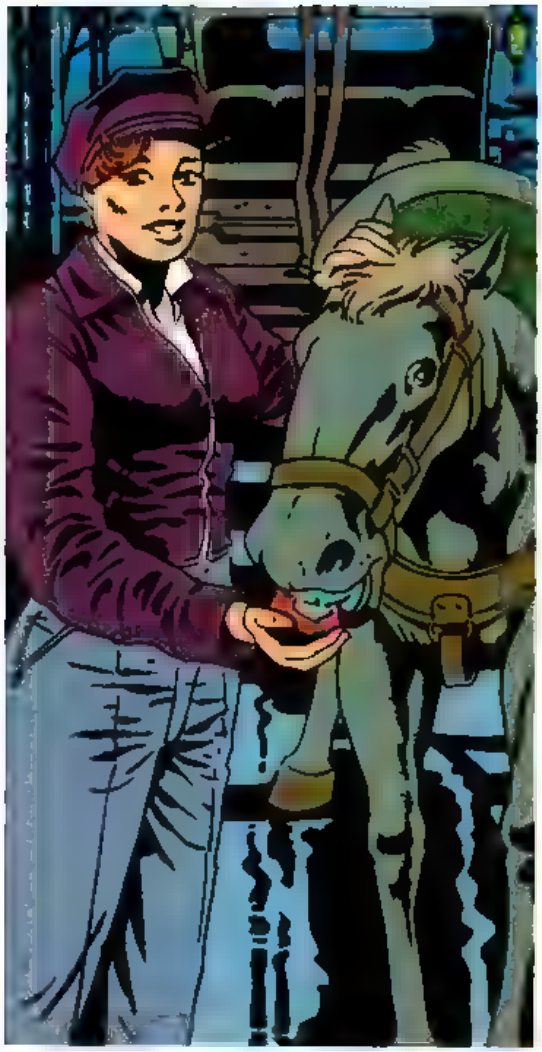
"I gave you an impossible task which you accepted for the consideration of a great deal of money. No, please, I want you to have it. I know you did as much as any man could do." Was I wrong in seeking vengeance? It hardly seems to matter now.

"It's late, Mr. Chandler. You know what to do if you find the man. I'll be here...for a while. You may call me if you have a reason."

On a table top near the chair, Todd's Smith & Wesson glinted in the dim light. I wondered if he was considering one final use for it.

A clock on the mantle kept telling me that time was running out. I started to say goodby, but Todd looked like he was a million miles away. I gave a nod that said it all and left quietly.

I crossed to the park side of 59th to catch an Eastbound cab, but nothing showed. All I needed now was a little rain. I got it.



An off-duty hack was parked in front of a couple of Hansoms, and I thought I'd give it a try. It was empty and as I stood there planning the next move, a familiar voice said: "Would'ja be needin' me services again now?"

She was still no bigger than a Busby Berkeley production number, and I had to admit the nag chomping on an apple she persistently held in his face was an original touch.

"I'm not giving my business to anyone else from now on."

She said it was against her better judgement, but I crawled in the back seat anyway and gave her Pier 66.

"It's more of the same you'll be gettin' then," she predicted, referring to our first meeting.

I didn't doubt it, but had no choice in the matter any more. I found one of the spare clips in my coat pocket, fed it to the .45 and pumped a shell into the chamber.

THURSDAY
1:57 AM

Pier 66 was as quiet as the morgue on a dull day, but the hair on the back of my neck was telling me not to believe it.

I slipped the Queen of the Taxis a pair of twenties, told her to wait for me around the corner about a half hour—and if I didn't show, to call Tom O'Hara at the 21st Precinct. He'd know what to do.

Irish shook her head and agreed to play devil's advocate at the cost of losing a customer.

She said I needed a little Irish luck before I did what I was planning to do, and produced a nice, shiny silver flask from her glove compartment.

"May your traffic lights always be green," I said, tilted the container skyward and got myself lucky. I handed the flask through the window and disappeared into the darkness.

An icy mist floated in off the water, and didn't stop me from sweating. The *Lady Luck* rode the choppy current with a bobbing motion that convinced me she was saying yes, come aboard.

The wharf was dark, and the rain would muffle my approach. I didn't see anyone on the deck, and I hoped it would keep anyone from seeing me as I legged over the side of the yacht. I unleathered the .45, flattened against the housing and moved forward like a cat on a hot rock.

I needed something to tie Danzer into the Kubelik job. If I couldn't find it aboard the *Lady Luck*, I'd get it out of Danzer the hard way—but that could take time, more time than I had to spend.

I reached the passageway that led below, listened at all the stateroom doors, and worked my way down to the engine room.

I'd decided to search the ship from the bottom up, but didn't expect too much. The *Lady* was being run on batteries now; the auxiliary that was working earlier to keep steam up for hot water and the generators had been shut off. I tried a long shot and hit a winner first time.

Inside one of the dead boilers was a package about as big as a violin case neatly wrapped in oil cloth. It was the gun I had glimmed earlier in the car. I knew because the cordite smell stayed with it like nickel cigar smoke in a pool room.

I gave the weapon the Chandler touch, rewrapped it and put it back in the boiler.

Ann had called this one, and I wanted to repay the favor. I crept back up the passageway to the master stateroom where Danzer and I had had the little merry-go-round.

The simple lever tumbler lock on the door surrendered to one of the filed down skeleton keys I carried.

It didn't take long to find the safe, but getting into it was another matter. The combination was probably somewhere in the desk but I didn't have the time to hunt for it—Danzer would do the job for me.

I found him a few minutes later, sleeping face down in a bed big enough to hold two, especially if one happened to be as big as a gorilla. The gorilla wasn't there.

"The next noise you make will be your last!"

He jumped awake but kept his mouth shut.

"Remember me, The Lone Ranger? I'm back for the little red envelope."

"What goddamned envelope?"

"Make me ask you again and I'll put you in the hospital for the rest of your life."

He was convinced.

His satin pajamas would have made Mae West envious. I let him put on the matching robe, and pointed him into the stateroom.

"I don't have the numbers," he said. "Only Kubelik had 'em!"

"You've got thirty seconds. Then I start breaking your fingers."

He found the combination, which somehow disappointed me. The safe yawned and I thumbed the hammer back on the .45. "Real easy," I said.

The box had more paper in it than a newsboy's sack, but he knew what I wanted and hefted it out carefully with his left hand.

I was feeling pretty good until a cold, black metal finger started climbing into my ear.

I turned carefully and found myself looking down the business end of a .357 Magnum. Horace was attached to the other end. The thought occured to me that he took this business too seriously.

"Tell him, Danzer. If I go down, I'm taking you along."

I edged the .45 closer and began to squeeze the trigger.

Danzer relayed the message, and it looked like we were going to play house for the rest of the night.

Then, Danzer found his own solution to the standoff.

I was trying to keep tabs on both of them, and as I eyeballed Horace, Danzer dropped his head beneath my automatic and bumped it upward.

That was Horace's cue. He caught me across the side of the jaw with his gun butt, while Danzer made a grab for mine. When we came up for air, the score was two to one—in their favor.

Horace shifted to get me around the throat, while his boss wrenched the big gun out of my grasp. First, he began to chuckle, then shake in a kind of sadistic rage. An arm that looked like an anatomy chart kept me pinned, and Danzer wasn't one to waste an opportunity He brought the gun down savagely across my knee and it felt like the knee-cap split. I growled in pain.

Danzer enjoyed it and used the gun on my other knee.

Danzer was playing for keeps now and both of us knew it. But I still had a card or two to play, and if I was going to play them at all, it had to be now.

"You're dead, Danzer. O'Hara's got the Thompson. I sent it to him."

They looked at each other, then Danzer said: "Nice try, shamus. We'll use it on your epitaph. Tell Finelli to take the boat out, Horace. We've got some garbage to go overboard."

"Yeah. Go ahead, Horace. Tell Finelli I cleaned his boiler this morning too!"

"Jesus Christ!" Danzer yelled and cracked the gun barrel across my right temple. He sent Horace down to the engine room and I did my best to stay upright.

"You're through, Danzer. The crime wave's over. I know that Kubelik caught you knocking down on the ship's take, so you had to rub him before he got you. But you screwed it up and left a half dozen witnesses that had to be taken care of. It's not going to work. You got a date with the man who throws the switch, and I'll be helping him!"

"The hell you will. That's not my rap. Sure I was rakin' off a few skins, but I had no part of the rub! I used one of Jake's old Tommy guns tonight from the car to make it look like Kubelik's killer. I would've finished the job if that old fool hadn't rammed us."

Danzer was slippery, but why the hell was he giving me the double talk routine? I was trying to piece it together when Horace came back. He was carrying a big oilcloth package.

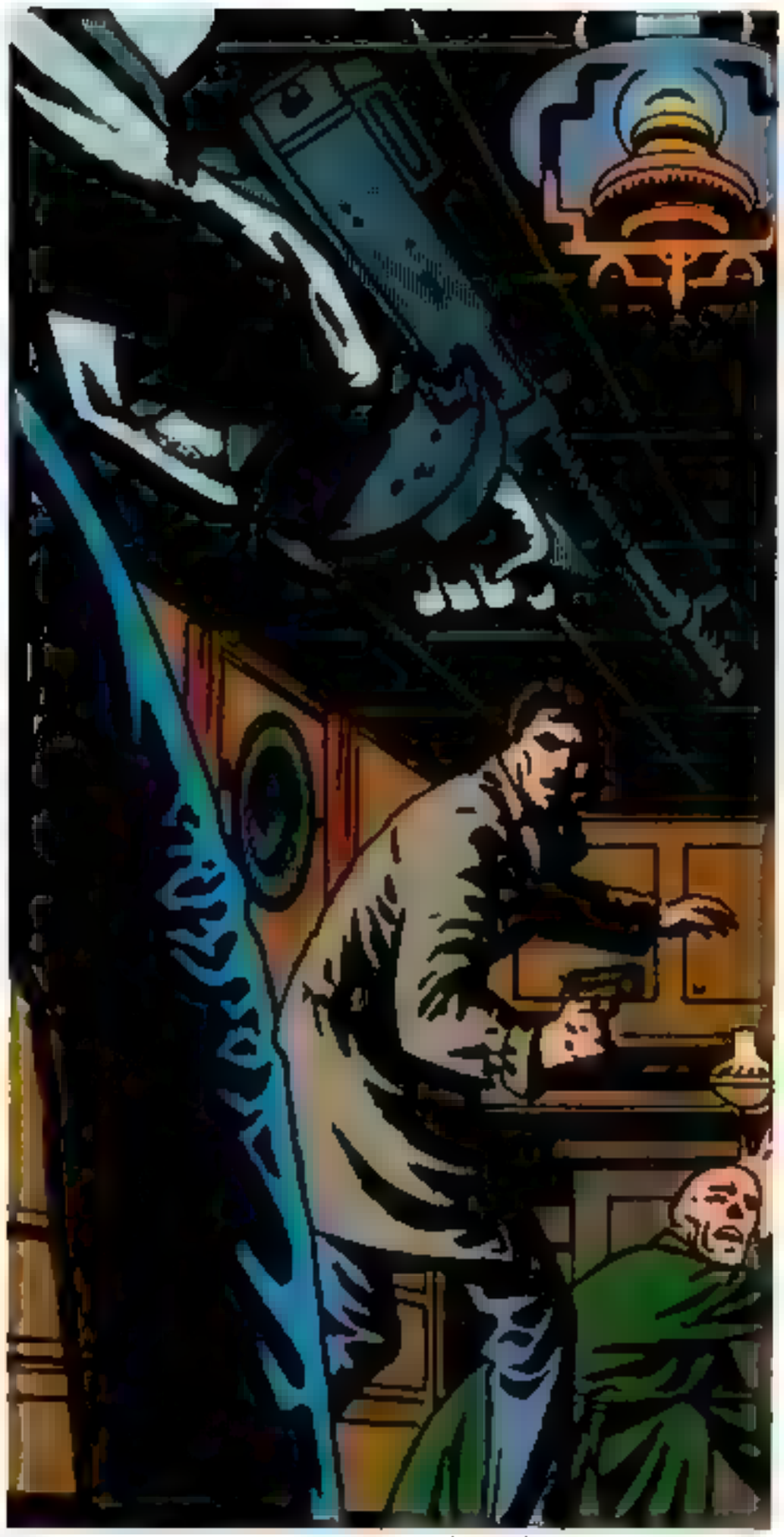
Danzer's disposition brightened. He gave me a dirty look and told Horace to open the thing.

I didn't mind, he was following my plan like he had a map. "You lyin' sonofabitch," he said.

"It's a requirement for getting a license in this state."

"This ain't gettin' us anywhere, Chandler. You keep tryin' to tie me into the Kubelik job, and I can't afford it. I think maybe we cruise out a few miles and see if you can swim the Atlantic."

It was time. I grabbed the barrel of the .45, pushed it back and jammed the firing mechanism. Danzer pulled the trigger, got nothing. I chopped him across the throat, took the gun.



Danzer stopped clawing at me, took a dive out of the way, and screamed at Horace to use the gun.

Horace hefted the big Thompson up like it was nothing more than a pea-shooter. The drum had obviously remained in place since the gun was used last—and judging by the weight of it, still held a handful of .45 caliber shells.

He jerked the bolt back and squeezed the trigger.

The room rocked with the explosion that followed as the chopper tore itself into a shower of hot shrapnel.

I knew they had to find out if I'd really given the gun to O'Hara. I put it back because I wanted it to be found in the boiler. They forced me to get the weapon in operation again.

What they didn't know was that I had forced a cupful of the ship's sealing tar into the barrel before I put it back in the boiler.

Danzer froze when he saw Horace come apart at the seams, but the explosion brought the rest of the crew into the cabin with guns drawn.

Three of them wedged into the doorway and began using me for target practice. I was moving and my first shot went wild; the second clipped the lead gunman and took him out. He crumpled, made room for the other two.

They had me pinned behind the desk and were keeping me there with a rain of gunfire. Then it suddenly stopped, got quiet.

Both men were curled in the doorway, face down. I couldn't figure it, then a shadow stepped across the passage into the cabin, and pocketed a Luger.

"You'd make a helluva hit man, Chandler," October said. "One of my lookouts spotted you getting on the *Lady Luck* and called me. Say thanks, flatfoot!"

Don't push it too far, October. I'm not in the mood."

I put the red envelope in my coat and wondered why October was being so generous.

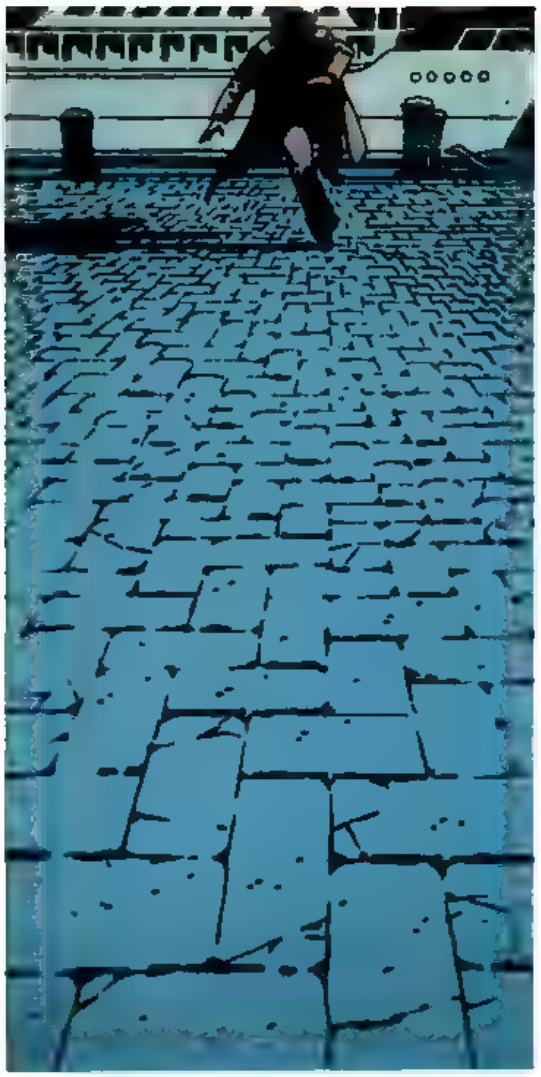
"I changed my mind about you, Chandler. You're going to clear me and get the heat off my operation. But you won't find the answers here. Danzer wouldn't kill his meal ticket. He knew if Kubelik was gone, I'd take over the ship and throw him down a flight of stairs. No, he's not the one."

I'd forgotten about Danzer for the moment, but he hadn't forgotten me. He leaped for the open safe, probably for a gun he had stashed.

October let him, then at the last moment, kicked the safe door shut.

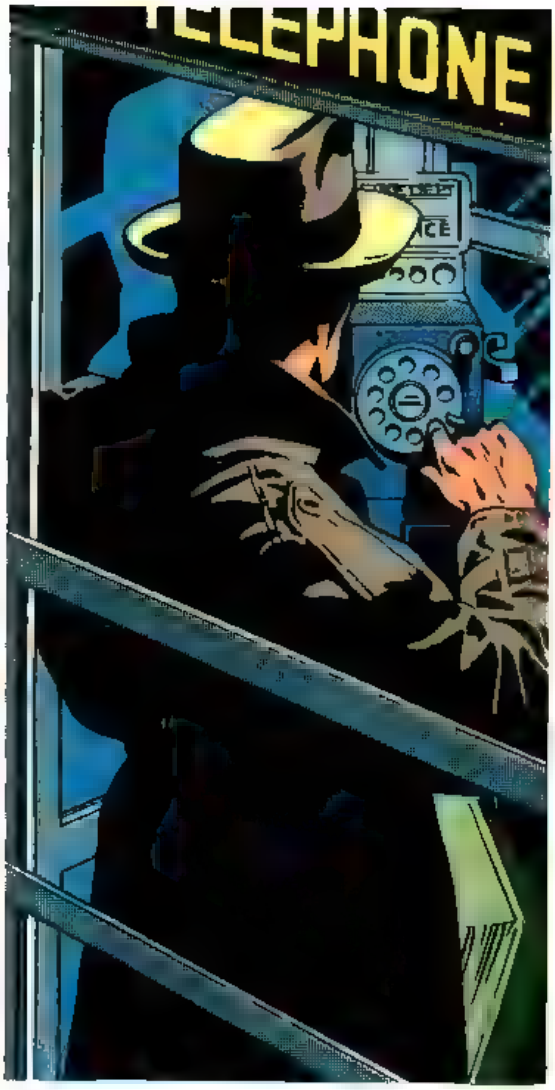
Danzer screamed without making a sound as the heavy door crushed his hands against the frame. He'd hang there until somebody came along to find him with his fingers in the till.

THURSDAY
4:47 AM



A noose was tightening around my neck and I couldn't stop it. I knew there was an APB out for me and every cop in town had orders to shoot on sight. On the other side was a killer who I couldn't keep from scoring again and again.

When I turned around, Joe October was gone. Any second now the good ship *Lady Luck* would be overrun with bluecoats. I didn't want to be here because Tom O'Hara wouldn't be too far behind.

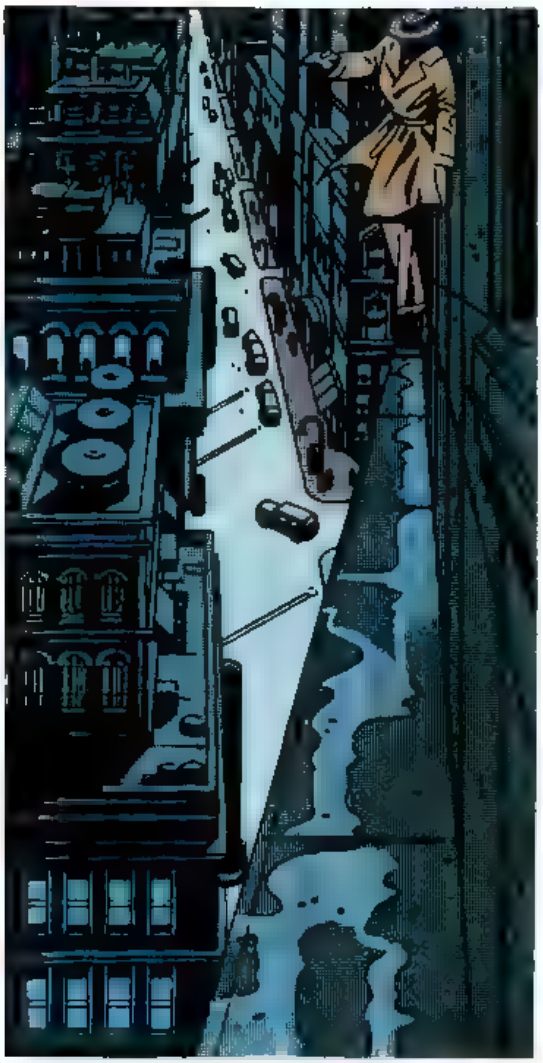


I was glad to see Irish still waiting for me. She had heard the explosions but didn't ask any questions. She knew tomorrow's papers would have the answers. I gave her Ann's address. It was all I had left now, and I had to play it to the end.

I stopped the cab at a phone booth, and dialed Todd's number. It rang over and over, unanswered, and somewhere in the back of my mind I kept hearing him: "I've got 72 hours to live. I want you to find my murderer—FIND MY MURDERER!"

It was all over. The clock had run out for both of us. Now there was another voice that kept saying: "You're a dead man." It was my voice.

I hung up and climbed back into the hack. Ann would hate me for it, but I decided to open the red envelope and see what Kubelik was using to keep her in line. I didn't like it. I needed answers—but I didn't expect what I found inside.



The envelope contained medical forms dated over ten years ago. They were from a private clinic in Miami, one that specialized in drug cases. I wanted to tear up the packet, but I kept reading.

Ann had been admitted there as a patient, and had given birth to a child. Because she was on drugs, it was born a drug addict. The baby was a boy and had died two weeks later. My stomach crawled at the payoff: it happened six months after she had left New York.

Now I knew why Ann had done her best to conceal the blackmail evidence from me—and from the society crowd she ran with.

I put the papers away and had Irish drop me at the back entrance. I sprung the door, and hit the stairs without the doorman spotting me.

The elevator took me to the top floor where I could get to the side of the building. A narrow ledge ran just under the windows.

I followed it until I reached the terrace outside Ann's apartment. A cold, bitter rain lashed the tower. I hardly felt it. I was waiting for a killer.

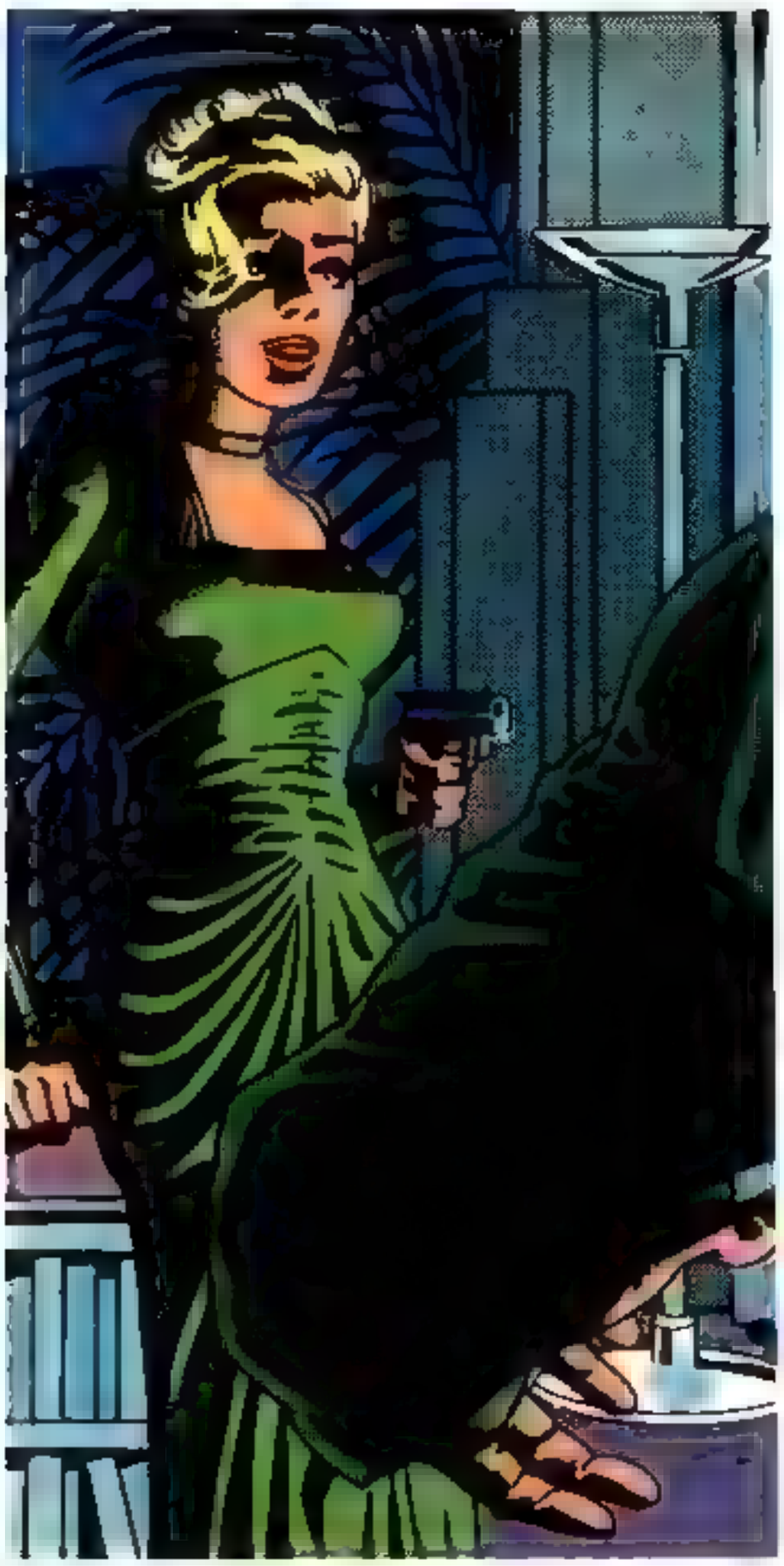
The living room was unoccupied, and somewhere inside a phone rang, then got quiet. I tried the door. Locked.

I had it all now except one final piece. That came when the doorbell rang a few minutes later. I saw Ann but couldn't see who was with her. I didn't have to.

She was nervous during the exchange between them, and suddenly snatched a small gun from a desk drawer. She aimed it at the man.

The big silence was over. I palmed the automatic out of its holster and kicked the door in. It spun them around.

Now we all belonged to the night, body and soul, and the moment of judgment was here.



"It ends now, Todd!" I snarled. The .45 made them statues.

"You set me up, suckered me into playing your game, framed me for murder—but it won't work. A bullet from this says so."

I cursed at how easily I'd been taken. I couldn't find the killer because he was in back of me all the time. TODD WAS THE KILLER!

His poison story was a blind, dreamed up to get me to lead him to the missing witnesses—witnesses he was unable to locate. I found them, Todd turned them into victims.

He looked at me and contempt began to etch its way into his unexpressive face. "So you finally figured it out. My compliments—but now, who'll believe you?"

"You're all the proof I'll need. Someone must have seen you at Vesco's hotel and at Connie Burns' place." I took the gun and the silencer from his pocket. "This will convince them."

"Don't count on it. I'll take them for a ride just like I took you."

"Sure, you took me. I thought you were on the level until I found out it wasn't the killer who gunned us in the car. No one knew where Vesco was except me—and I tipped you!

"While I was playing hide and seek with Danzer, you went to the hotel, used my name to get inside the room and put the freeze on Vesco.

"When I got there, you lammed out the fire escape and slowed me up with a warning shot. You didn't kill me because you'd need me again if the address in Vesco's wallet didn't pay off. The business in the alley was part of your act—one shot with the silencer and one without. Almost too clever.

"You found Connie Burns picture and went after her, but I got there first. Then you dusted me and built a frame for the job you did on the girl.

"You're full of tricks like that poison angle with the sweating and shivering. What was it Todd, drugs?

A smile played on his lips like he was acknowledging a fine performance. "Nothing much, an overdose of insulin. A cube of sugar brings you back to normal in no time. You were convinced because most of what I told you was true. I am an artist."

"I know. I checked."

"Don't chastise yourself for being fooled, Mr. Chandler. Even the best of us are at times. I fooled myself for years trying to paint what was inside me, but it always came out wrong.

Everyone who saw my work knew and never let me forget it. They humiliated me, laughed at me behind my back. But I found a way to even the score."

"So that's how it began. How many others were there?"

"Enough. More than would buy my paintings. My services are very private and very high-priced. Aren't they, Mrs. Crane?"

Ann stood there quietly throughout the conversation, still holding the little automatic in her hand. I had hoped it would work out differently and had all the answers now, except the big one—why? I had to know and nosed the .45 in her direction.

That was what Todd wanted, because the moment he was out of the line of fire, he leaped for my gun. Somehow, I hadn't expected it from him.

We hit the floor. Todd wrapped his hand around the muzzle, tried to force it back toward me.

He was much stronger than he appeared and he had the advantage of leverage as he inched the gun backwards.

Then it went off between us, and the white-hot gunflash blinded me completely.

I felt Todd wrench out of my grasp, and staggered to my feet.

Ann screamed.

The room was white and a fiery pain seared my eyes, but I managed to see him dive for cover and, in a moment, return.

He had something dark and unweildy in his hands, and when I heard the click I knew what it was.

He leveled the big Thompson right at me, while my brain burst with an aurora of white heat.

Instinctively, I swung the .45 up in front of me.

We both fired at the same time.

The room shook with thunder and deafened us. I kept pulling the trigger until there was nothing left and felt my side explode with pain. I reached down to stop the red syrup with my hand.

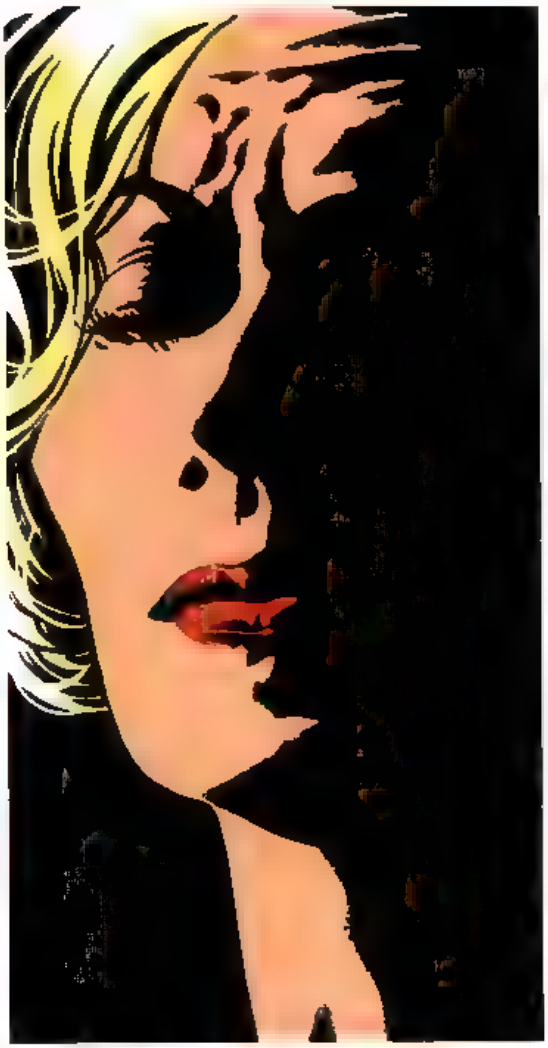
Todd stood in front of me, slowly lowered the weapon. Then something inhuman twisted itself into his face. He dropped to his knees, crashed to the floor.

It was over. The .45 got too heavy, fell from my grip.

Ann still stood behind the desk. She reached for the phone and asked for the police. While she waited, the radio described a fugitive named Chandler who was wanted for murder.

Through a red haze, I heard her give her address and ask for help.

"Yes! Please come immediately! There's been an accident. The gambling ship murderer...I've just killed him! HIS NAME WAS CHANDLER!"



She cradled the phone, met my eyes with hers. The automatic she held never wavered.

"It's too late...too late for us, Chandler! Too late for everything!"

"I know," I said and tossed the red envelope on the table in front of her.

She looked at me and her eyes drained of their color. Her face was drawn and tired, the face of a woman who had done it all, who had nothing left.

"Funny, you guessed it was Joe October. We've had five months together...and this time it's right. I know it. That's why I gambled everything for it."

"You mean October didn't know about Todd?"

"Of course not. Jake Kubelik stood between us and wouldn't let me go. I hired Todd to kill Jake.

"Then he got you into it and it was like old times with us for a few moments. We played it. Now it's all over.

"I told Todd to come here tonight for the pay-off. His job was done. I planned to kill him and tell the police he came to murder me as the final witness.

"They'd have to believe me, of course. Now I'll have to change my story a little, but it'll work. I'll say you and Todd were together. There are witnesses who'll bear that out."

She brought the gun up, squeezed the trigger.

A roar drowned the silence for a moment, then faded. Ann's face lost her expression, became almost pure as she collapsed across the desk top.

Todd had rallied for a moment, just long enough to hear her plan and repay the double cross before he died.

The night had seen it all and was vanishing in slow motion as the morning sky crawled across the horizon.

Somewhere on the street below us, a siren began to wail.

I'd remember. The night would forget.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Whoever said truth is stranger than fiction could easily have made the statement about the creator of Chandler.

Steranko was born in 1938, a few days after Orson Welles' famous *War of The Worlds* radio broadcast. "I think it may have had some bearing on my development," he speculates. His early years were spent evolving his skills as an artist and a magician (using paraphernalia "borrowed" from his father's magic act).

He spent several summers with circuses and carnivals, eventually working his way up to side-show performer where he did magic, fire-eating, the Hindu bed of nails and other acts.

By the time he was in his late teens, Steranko had reaped a wealth of newspaper and TV publicity as an escape artist where he was laced into straitjackets and suspended by his heels, shackled with a dozen pairs of handcuffs and leg irons by police officials and locked into prison cells, entombed in huge vaults, buried beneath the earth, tied to giant ferris wheels, nailed into packing crates, stuffed into government mailbags, and dropped to the bottom of rivers in the confines of heavy trunks. Almost always, he'd free himself in less time than it took to lock him up. (Years later, a comic book inspired by his exploits was published under the title, *Mr. Miracle.*)

Realizing that escape magic was a dead end as far as public performances were concerned, Steranko switched to the opposite end of the spectrum, that of close-up magic, where he entertained in the intimate surroundings of night clubs and bars with cards and coins. He wrote several books explaining the unique, off-beat techniques he developed. One of those volumes, still unpublished, has become an underground best-seller among magicians who have pirated and circulated xerox copies of the original manuscript. He became one of the country's leading "Card Stars" before he was twenty-one years old.

It was during this time that he dropped his first name and began using his last name exclusively in the style of Blackstone and Houdini. "After all," he says, "how many Sterankos could there be?"

Almost overnight, Steranko left his magic career to concentrate his efforts in the field of music. He had played with several drum and bugle corps while in his teens, and preceeded to form his own rock and roll combos for the next twelve years, doubling on a number of instruments. He fronted the groups, performed as lead singer, and was responsible for the bands' arrangements. His personal preference runs

from houserock to jazz. "Music has always been closer to my heart than any other of my proceedings, and infinitely more fulfilling. I often regret my decision to move out of that field. Perhaps sometime in the future I'll return to music. I'd like to take a year off to work out some ideas I've had in this area."

At seventeen, Steranko freelanced as an artist for a local newspaper, took a job as an assistant to a commercial artist, then secured a position in the art department with a printing firm where he learned every operation from type composition to platemaking to press work. "The time clock and I weren't compatible, so, after five years, I quit."

He was immediately offered the position of art director with a prominent advertising agency—strictly on a freelance basis. Here he designed everything from brochures to billboards, covering commodities from beer to baby carriages. "Where I previously had to work on as many as twenty jobs a day, I could now concentrate on a single design problem for twenty days."

For the next four years, Steranko held down the equivalent of two full-time jobs, working as art director and copywriter by day, playing music at night, often at location jobs four to five hours long.

In 1965, he met Joe Simon, one of the creators of the legendary Captain America of comics fame. Simon was attempting to initiate a new line of books for Harvey Publications, and, after seeing an illustration that Steranko had drawn of a Roman gladiator, asked him to help develop the upcoming series.

An hour later, Steranko had created five new characters, three of which were accepted for publication. Simon rejected his offer to draw any of the series, instead confining him to writing the scripts. The following year, **Spyman, Magicmaster** and **The Gladiator** appeared—and disappeared as the entire line folded after a few issues.

Steranko prepared material for a new character to sell elsewhere, and through an unexpected turn of events, sold the property to Paramount Pictures as a Saturday morning animated series. The same day he was hired by Stan Lee to draw for Marvel Comics.

He was assigned to a super spy strip called **Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.** (Supreme Headquarters International Espionage Law-enforcement Division!) His first few attempts (over Jack Kirby's breakdowns) were extremely primitive. Then Steranko rocked the comic world with a new kind of approach that combined innovation, insight and imagination—and turned the Fury strip into a *tour de force* of graphic surprises that created a profound impact on readers of the twelve cent magazine.

"I utilized motion picture technique in telling those stories: dynamic symmetry, symbolic mont-

ages, point-of-view angle shots, match-dissolve transitions, in short, any type of shot that would leave a maximum impression on the viewer. The style, which I later came to call Zap Art, became the star of the series."

Steranko employed a dazzling range of special effects in ways that had never been explored before in comics. His stories exploded with optical art, photo montages, line resolutions, psychedelic color, strobe effects, and wild ideas like a ten-issue serial that climaxed in a four-page spread that readers had to buy two comics to see all at once.

Steranko's presence has changed the direction of the comics medium, set a pace for others to follow, unleashed a score of imitators, and created a devoted cult of followers who seek out all his work. He drew other series for Marvel including *Captain America* and the *X-Men*, yet his reputation has been built on less than thirty stories.

His mastery of portraying time and space attracted the famed French director Alain Resnais, and led to a collaboration on a film project. His strong sense of color, motion and composition made a lasting friend of Italian director Federico Fellini. Steranko has also written and pre-directed a half-hour film made at the American Film Institute in Hollywood.

During this period, Steranko continued to work in advertising, play music, draw comics (all full-time jobs) in addition to writing scripts and developing characters for Paramount. It was rumored that he had developed a pill to eliminate sleep.

Then, he did a surprising thing. He quit all four jobs for various reasons, and entered the highly competitive field of paperback cover and magazine illustration. Before long he was painting for science fiction, heroic fantasy, western, and pulp adventure books (including Pyramid's new **Shadow** series).

Steranko has won numerous awards for his work in every field of endeavor, from magic to comic art to commercial design, both here and in Europe. He has shown his work internationally at over 40 exhibitions and frequently lectures on popular culture.

In 1969, he established SUPER-GRAPHICS, a full-scale publishing organization, for the purpose of producing material related to visual storytelling in every media. In addition to numerous books, calendars, prints and posters, he has published two volumes of the *History of Comics*, both 100,000 word narratives that have been acclaimed as the definitive works on the subject. *Mediascene*, his periodical devoted to popular culture in all forms from the comics to the cinema, is now in its fourth year of publication.

In 1970, working with Byron Preiss, Steranko produced at personal expense, an innovative

comic book dealing with the problems of drug abuse. The critical acclaim it garnished ranged from Percy Sutton, the Borough President of Manhattan, to Joan Ganz Cooney, head of Children's Television Workshop, the producers of *Sesame Street.*

This book is a tribute to those who came before, tough guys in the movies like, Mark Stevens in *The Dark Corner,* Robert Mitchum in *Out of the Past,* Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon* or Dana Andrews in *Laura.* In the pulps, they had names like the Continental Op, Philip Marlowe, Simon Lash and Race Williams, and maybe even Dan Turner, the Hollywood sleuth whose "roscoe" always went "KA-CHOW!"

Red Tide is an original in many ways, some not as obvious as others. For example, the art was done same size as it appears in the deluxe edition — and was drawn entirely in pencil instead of ink, another first. Steranko's solution regarding the relationship of type and picture is equally unique. Each page has been written precisely to 26 lines, and the variety of compositions in the static two-panels-per-page format is nothing short of amazing. "I deliberately paced the panel size," Steranko reveals, "to approximate the rhythm of time—like minutes ticking off the 72-hour deadline."

Most of all, *Red Tide* is a tip of the Mallory to the authors, the great ones like James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett, W. R. Burnett, MacKinlay Kantor—and of course, Raymond Chandler, to the not-so-great ones as well.

Chandler represents Steranko's remergence into the field of visual storytelling, his first in over five years. It encompasses the full measure of his talent. He conceived the character, created the book's unique format, wrote the script, drew the illustrations, did the coloring, painted the cover, designed the logo, layed out all the type pages, handled the mechanicals, and worked on the promotional campaign.

"I have never thought of myself as an artist or a writer, but primarily as an entertainer," Steranko has said. Those who know him, feel the title of Renaissance Man fits him perfectly.●

A number of other people were involved in the premiere Chandler story. Ken Bruzenak worked on backgrounds and coloring, in addition to the book's production, as did Gail Heimbach and Jerry Simon. David Server meticulously oversaw the color separations.●

Joe Gores is the only writer to win a Mystery Writers of America "Edgar" in each of three different catagories (novel, short story, TV drama). His most recent detective novel, *Hammett,* is set in 1928 San Francisco—a city where Gores himself spent twelve years as a private eye before turning to the typewriter.●

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